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Transnational Higher Education and Quality: *Oman's Experience and the Concept of Policy Borrowing*

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed independently and without illegal help and is a result of my own work. To the best of my belief and knowledge this work contains no material previously published or written by another person or persons, except where due reference is made. No part of this thesis has been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification other than as specified here to the University of Edinburgh.

Copyright Statement

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Abstract

Globalization has had a well-documented impact on higher education (e.g. Giddens, 1990; Ginkle, 2003; Altbach and Knight, 2007). The attendant massive expansion of higher education both globally and at national level has brought with it increasing concerns regarding quality.

One context within which such concerns are evident is that of *Transnational Higher Education* (TNHE). TNHE, also known as cross-border education, mainly refers to education that is provided to students residing in a country other than the one where the awarding institution is located (UNESCO/Council of Europe, 2001). TNHE takes various forms and serves multiple objectives but the multidimensional phenomenon can be described as an example of *Policy Borrowing* (Phillips and Ochs, 2003).

Oman is a country whose modern educational system was established very recently (1970) and is still expanding rapidly. As elsewhere in the 'developing world', the Omani government has met the increasing demand for higher education in large part by encouraging private higher education provision. However, this has been associated with an increasing desire to build capacity and assure quality of provision. In response, the Omani Ministry of Higher Education turned to TNHE for solutions: private sector providers in Oman have been required to enter academic partnerships with internationally recognized universities.

In this research, I investigate the rationales, approaches and perceptions of this process from a *receiver country* perspective and address the implications. Most published research on TNHE focuses on *providers'* perspectives and activities, and the impact of TNHE has only been studied in a small number of generally sizeable countries. However, the Gulf States, especially Oman, have not received the same attention, mainly due to the fact that TNHE is a recent phenomenon in this part of the world. Research to date in Oman thus remains very limited (Ameen, Chapman and Al Barawani, 2010; Al Barawani, Ameen and Chapman, 2011).

The main objective of the research at the centre of this Thesis was therefore to explore the expectations, experiences and conclusions of a sample of staff of three private sector universities in Oman regarding TNHE, within which their university was/is active. The topic is investigated in the context of national policy and institutional TNHE strategy. Data were

generated through documentary analysis and qualitative interviews. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted in three stages:

Stage one: desk research and pilot study to set the direction for the research (8 participants)
Stage two: interviews carried out over multiple visits to the three private universities selected as the cases (29 participants)
Stage three: interviews with policy- and decision-makers (6 participants), to help in the process of reviewing and contextualizing the data from Stage 2.

Data analysis revealed variation from the existing literature on this topic when it comes to defining the concept of *affiliation*, which is central to the approach taken in Oman to TNHE, as well as inconsistency across the three case universities, highlighting the complex dynamic that exists, with hugely varied expectations, numerous rationales and motivations and varying experiences being reported.

Findings also reveal that, as reported by the majority of interviewees, the key rationales for engagement with TNHE are building capacity and assuring quality, alongside other rationales such as generating revenue and increasing student recruitment, which form the main driving force on the part of receiver institutions. This is consistent with the overall national imperative of increasing the number of HE places available for Oman's young people, although the focus on volume is seen by the informants in the institutions as falling short in terms of capacity building and the enhancement of quality.

Many interviewees voiced concerns that foreign partners' approaches do not necessarily contribute to capacity building and may remain limited in scope, impacting on the quality of teaching and learning in ways that are not necessarily positive. Indeed, concerns were reported that the original overarching educational rationales of improving quality and capacity building may have been displaced by a more instrumental emphasis, for example on income generation. Some informants were firmly in favour of developing indigenized systems and reducing reliance on foreign partners.

This point is taken up in a concluding discussion of the implications of the findings for Omani universities currently dependent on *Transnational Higher Education*, and the implications of this dependency for the Omani higher education system as a whole.

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List of Abbreviations

AACSB: Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business

AUQA: Australian Universities of Quality Assurance Agency

EFA: Education for All

ENQAHE: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

GATS: General Agreement on Trade in Services

GCC: Gulf Cooperation Council

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institution

IIEP: International Institute for Education Planning (IIEP)

IMF: International Monetary Fund

INQAAHE: International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education

MDG: Millennium Development Goals

MENA: Middle East and North Africa

MoHE: Ministry of Higher Education

MOOCs: Massive Open Online Courses

MoU: Memorandum of Understanding

OAAA: Oman Academic Accreditation Authority

OAC: Oman Accreditation Council

OECD: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

PHE: Private Higher Education

PISA: Programme for International Student Assessment

QA: Quality Assurance

QAA: Quality Assurance Agency

QE: Quality Enhancement

ROSQA: Requirements for Oman's System of Quality Assurance

TIMSS: Trends in International Maths and Science Study

TNHE: Transnational Higher Education

TQM: Total Quality Management

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

WTO: World Trade Organization

Chapter 1: Introduction

The aim of this introductory chapter is to establish the theoretical and contextual background for this study. In the first part of this chapter, the background for the research is provided. The second part highlights the motivation behind the research whereas the third part focuses on its potential significance. In the fourth part, I present the limitations of the research. The concept of 'policy borrowing' is explained in the fifth part. In the final part, I present a brief overview of the research.

1.1 Background to the Research

The last four decades or so have seen considerable transformation of Higher Education (HE) in both developing and developed countries. This can be attributed to several trends (see, for example, Altbach 1999; Teichler 1997). A massive increase in student numbers in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), or what has been termed 'massification' by Altbach (2008), constitutes one of the most important of these. As a consequence, national systems have been forced to adapt to new realities, in an attempt to move towards meeting expectations associated with globalized higher education. International organizations, regional and international agreements (e.g. the EU's Bologna Project, and UNESCO's World Declaration on Higher Education of 1998) have contributed to policy and practice convergence and raised the stakes for both providers and governments.

In developed countries such a situation has resulted in an 'export drive', with higher education as a marketable 'product'. In developing countries, internationalization arrived in the form of *transnational*, also known as cross-border, higher education. Internationalization is related to the physical mobility of goods, services and people across borders (Teichler, 2004). Knight (2013) notes that internationalization is helping to meet the challenges of the 21st century and is therefore one of the main forces shaping higher education. However, while it promises solutions, it also carries challenges and threats.

In their response to such challenges, countries 'importing' higher education from elsewhere have had to address a range of issues in terms of their approach, rationales and regulations. As higher education has become a *cross-border* phenomenon many policies, programmes and practices have travelled with it.

Against this backdrop, the research at the centre of this thesis aimed to explore how a developing country, Oman, in attempting to address a range of challenges, has approached Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) as a solution to key issues, including not only the increase in provision of higher education opportunities and enhancement of the contribution of higher education to national development and modernization, but also the imperatives associated with the need to ensure the quality and relevance of the higher education experience.

In effect, education in Oman has developed within the last four decades. Education as currently (formally) known began in 1970 when His Majesty Sultan Qaboos assumed power. Beyond the Sultan's own prioritization of education, economic and social changes in Omani society attendant on his personal vision of the country's future have contributed to the transformation in the way education is perceived. Part of this shift is associated with a desire to be part of the globalized world.

In the rapid growth and development of higher education in Oman, a first-level priority was a focus on quantitative growth that targeted widening access. However, from the 1990s onwards, education became part of the country's strategy for achieving Oman's 20/20 vision.

While trying to fulfil this vision, however, the public/state education sector, as in other developing countries, faced challenges in meeting demand. In 1998/1999, the 28 HEIs managed to absorb only 20% of school graduates, i.e. around 6,286 of a total of about 32,000 secondary school graduates (Al Lamki, 2002). Clearly, the rapid growth of the general education system outpaced growth in higher education, leading to inability to absorb students wanting to pursue their post-school education.

A solution was seen, and encouraged, in the establishment of Private Higher Education Institutions (PHEIs). The PHE sector was perceived as a partner in development. With that in mind, the government provided generous incentives that included substantial financial grants for each private university, such as allocation of lands for construction and easy loans, tax exemption for the first five years (Royal Decree 42/99, 67/00), and financial grants of up to RO 20 million (US $ 55 million). At the same time, the government placed restrictions on licences given to foreign providers to operate independently in Oman. However, there was no legal limitation on the number of PHEI licences for local investors. That said, the Council of Higher Education and the MoHE required them to meet certain requirements and pass a licensing procedure.

Such tempting incentives caused the mushrooming of PHEIs. In just over a decade, between 1995 and 2008, almost twenty-four PHEIs were founded, four of which are universities while the rest are colleges. Currently, there are more than 60 public and private HEIs providing education to more than 50,000 students in Oman.

This unprecedented increase in HE provision made it necessary to assure stakeholders and the community about the quality of the PHEIs' provision. Yet, while PHEIs developed mainly in the 1990s, it wasn't until 2008 that a Quality Audit Manual was issued by the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC), which itself had only been established in 2001. As a consequence of lack of local experience and expertise in this area, this development itself was a product of transnational activity and the importation of foreign experience, expertise and knowledge.

At the level of provision, *transnational higher education* (also known as *cross-border higher education*) which manifests itself in the state sector, not only in the private sector, was already a reality by 2001. Each term mainly refers to education that is provided to students residing in a country other than the one where the awarding institution is located (UNESCO/ Council of Europe, 2001[1]). PHEIs were required to affiliate (partner) with internationally recognized universities in what is known in Oman as *International Academic Affiliation*.

In the literature (see Chapter 4 below), higher education moving across borders is presented as having evolved over time. Knight (2013) believes that such mobility can be seen in three generations:

- Generation 1: *Student mobility* occurs traditionally when students leave their home country to get an education
- Generation 2: *Provider and programme mobility* occurs when the provider and the service travel to students in their home countries
- Generation 3: *The emergence of education hubs* encompasses the forces at the centre of generations 1 and 2, though the emphasis is on the creation of regional supra-national regional centres in a planned manner for the purpose of concentration.

In the Omani context, both generations 1 and 2 have been experienced so far. Generation 1 of education mobility has been known since 1970 in the form of scholarships given to students

[1] See full report at http://www.aic.lv/meeting

to travel abroad. However, generation 2 is a more modern phenomenon that developed in the last two decades in conjunction with the development of PHEIs. Generation 3 is almost certainly now in an emergent phase in the Gulf.

In terms of quality issues, despite the measures to control affiliations, the rate of growth in affiliation carries challenges and may pose a threat to the sector, particularly though not exclusively in terms of public perception of quality. For example, the prevailing diversity of provision poses a question in terms of the national system framework's ability to handle variations in approaches at the same time as ensuring consistency of standards.

According to the Ministry of Higher Education (2014-2015), 26 of Oman's PHEIs (universities, university colleges and colleges) have entered into partnerships with more than 50 educational institutions from the following countries: US, UK, Lebanon, Jordan, Australia, India, Netherlands, Scotland, New Zealand, Spain, Ireland, Egypt, Malaysia, Turkey, Germany and Iran. Provider and programme mobility comes in different shapes and forms, bringing different contents and arrangements. Programmes offered include diplomas, bachelor's and master's degrees. Moreover, TNHE extends to other activities related to provision of services, research collaborations, consultancy and student exchange.

Depending on the scope of a particular inter-institutional agreement, the expectation is that the foreign (well developed and established) universities will ensure quality and comparability of provision of local Omani HEIs and help them develop capacity. Generally speaking, foreign partners take care of academic aspects such as curriculum issues and assessment, whereas the local HEIs take administrative responsibility and (variably) participate in the delivery and management of the programme. Depending on the particular arrangement, certain agreed financial charges are paid by the Omani partner to the foreign partner.

At the centre of the inter-institutional relationship there is therefore a complex nexus of elements: finance may be one of the least problematic of them, but even here there are issues. Al Harthi (2011) suggested that partners do not play equal roles despite the amount of investment involved. The reported amount paid to partners could exceed $ 200,000 annually. Affiliation to an international counterpart institution is, hence, viewed as an additional financial burden on the institution's budget and questions are asked about value-for-money and 'value added'. According to Al Harthi (2011, p. 332),

'The sole reliance of the local universities and colleges on the academic affiliation system, whereby each institution is affiliated with an international university, will not help Oman's private institutions to improve their educational services. Finding channels of cooperation with different recognized universities around the world in academic and technical affairs would reflect the keenness of each institution to improve itself academically and technically'.

This implies a possible gap whereby dependence on affiliation seems to fall short of satisfying original intentions: not only to increase the number of HE places available but also to assure quality and assist capacity building. Moreover, it implies questions about the efficacy of affiliation and the type of experience with partners that has been afforded to Oman's HEIs, their students and staff.

Such implications may have significant resonance in the sphere of Quality. Foreign partners come with their own interpretations of quality. For developing countries, such as Oman, the question arises of the extent to which quality, predefined by foreign partners, matches national requirements, expectations and values.

1.2 The Motivation behind the Research

The impetus for this PhD study originated in my appointment as Head of Quality Assurance in Oman's College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS) in 2007. Unlike other state-funded higher education institutions (HEIs) in Oman, CBFS is at present actively involved in transnational partnerships with universities beyond Oman for its academic and professional provision (degrees, diplomas and certificates). In fact, its first academic affiliations date back as far as 2000, with a Strathclyde University (Scotland) MBA programme. By 2010,

'*The College's …. strategy is thus one of quality building through international affiliations. The "Umbrella Concept" adopted by the College envisions an Omani institution of international quality achieved through hosting assorted international benchmark programmes with home-country quality norms being maintained'. (CBFS Portfolio, 2010,* p. 26*)*

In a Quality Audit that same year the College received a *Commendation* for well-established affiliations with internationally accredited business schools.
This exemplifies the phenomenon of *programme mobility*, an aspect of transnational higher education. In this way, CBFS shares some common characteristics with Oman's growing

private higher education (PHE) sector and provided a useful site for the pilot study in the research at the centre of this thesis. It also helps to account for my interest in the phenomenon of transnational higher education affiliations.

Beyond this, however, the history of the development of formal education in Oman dovetails with my own life history. I was born in 1972, two years after His Majesty (HM) Sultan Qaboos bin Said assumed power, ending an era in which Oman was a relatively isolated, under-developed country. From 1970 to 1980, the initial emphasis of HM was widening access to education.

I started school in 1978 and due to lack of proper infrastructure, the school I joined was in fact a rented house. The country's imperative in education was driven by HM's vision. His most famous saying, '*Let there be education even if it is under the shades of trees*', has been inspiring and is still widely quoted. His annual speeches include messages on education, giving direction and vision. Beginning in the 1980s there was greater emphasis on qualitative aspects of education in terms of curriculum and facilities.

My own school experience was of a borrowed academic curriculum that came primarily from Egypt and teachers who were non-Omanis, mainly from Jordan, Sudan and Egypt. Leaving school in 1990, I studied at Sultan Qaboos University, the only government University in Oman, and after graduation become a teacher in 1994 in government schools. For about ten years, I worked as an English language teacher in secondary public schools and in 2005 I joined the staff of CBFS.

Within my new programme of work, I became a teaching faculty member in an undergraduate programme affiliated with Bradford University. In 2006, I received a scholarship to study for an MSc in Management and Leadership from Strathclyde University. The initial idea for my PhD emerged from my MSc thesis, 'Managing Change to Introduce Quality Assurance', in which the focus was on staff resistance to change resulting from the adoption of new quality assurance policies.

However, returning home and being assigned the responsibility of assuring quality in CBFS made it inevitable that I would come into contact with the different partnerships now recognized as comprising transnational higher education (TNHE).

Researching TNHE is therefore directly linked to my career and I know from my professional experience that academic staff experience and perceptions are – or can be – a useful 'barometer' to use when exploring the phenomenon of TNHE affiliation.

1.3 Potential Significance of the Study

Transnational higher education, especially in respect of academic affiliation, has become quite central to the HE sector in Oman. Reliance on TNHE is attributable to Oman's initial inability to provide enough higher education to meet demand and need, at the same time as ensuring and safeguarding the quality of higher education, especially after encouraging the development of PHE.

Encouraging TNHE represents a policy shift that has changed the landscape of higher education in Oman. The startling growth in the number of affiliations (partnerships) requires understanding of the transnational experience, especially in terms of rationales and the extent to which TN affiliation is perceived as suitable from the receivers' point of view. It also requires insight into how those staff who are involved in Omani HEIs think of partners, in terms of their contribution to quality of provision and experience. Rumbley and Altbach (2007) argue – rightly – that little is known about the phenomenon of TNHE.

With many countries trying to improve the quality of their national educational systems, the practice of trying to understand and learn from what is happening elsewhere is likely to end in 'borrowing' and transferring all or part of that inevitably foreign practice or policy. In part, this thesis questions whose interest is best served when phenomena such as TNHE, with solutions that have been developed somewhere else, land in Oman. Given the circumstances, to what extent are these practices likely to be indigenized and incorporated effectively and appropriately into the local systems?

By investigating the situation in three different (private sector) universities from the staff perspective, this research aims to:

- Explore how TNHE affiliation is experienced and the extent to which partners are perceived as contributors to quality
- Identify key issues that affect the ability of institutions to maximize benefits from partners

- Identify gaps in the literature regarding perceptions of receivers
- Support higher education policy-makers in policy- and decision-making relevant to TNHE affiliations

The **Research Questions** at the centre of this study are:

1. What are the rationales behind transnational partnerships (at national and organizational level) in higher education in Oman?
2. What are the approaches experienced in each case institution? How do these vary and why?
3. How do academic staff informants perceive and experience transnational partnerships and their efficacy?
4. How do they see transnational partnerships as a contribution to quality?
5. What are the implications of the current level of dependence on transnational partnerships on quality provision and on educational development of the higher education sector in Oman, and what issues does the case raise regarding the practice of policy borrowing?

1.4 Limitations of the Research

This thesis aims to investigate the phenomenon of TNHE in Oman with relevance to affiliations, and programme mobility in relation to the concept of quality. However, inevitably, it has limitations. These include the facts that

- The research study on which it is based was conducted in only three universities. While these universities cover three key regions in Oman out of five, experiences in terms of TNHE are limited to these contexts and may not cover all forms of TNHE existing in other contexts
- The research considers the phenomenon from a receiver point of view, so the exporter view is not directly included
- The study focuses on the national and institutional levels, including the experience of staff, and excludes the student view and experience
- Quality assurance is explored with relevance to TNHE in terms of efficacy of affiliation and teaching and learning; research is not a direct focus
- In terms of sample, the aim was to get 8-10 interviewees in each HEI. Such a sample

would prevent any generalization of findings on a national level, limiting generalizability to institutional practice at most

- The sample is dominated by male views as it was not possible to get more female interviewees. However, the project explores the professional experience of participants and therefore the issue of male/female perspectives may not be relevant. Moreover, multiple stakeholder views were elicited
- In terms of the methodology adopted, this research employs document analysis and in-depth interviews sequentially. It does not use a mixed methods approach.

1.5 The Concept of 'Policy Borrowing' as a Lens

1.5.1 Overview

With reference to the notion of 'Policy borrowing', policies may travel or be borrowed for various reasons (Halpin and Troyna, 1995), sometimes as part of perceived solutions to advance countries' education, specifically in the developing world. Whether or not it represents a deliberate act of borrowing (Phillips and Ochs, 2004), an issue remains regarding the extent to which the imported solutions are relevant and sustainable.

The concept of 'policy borrowing' will provide the lens through which the phenomenon of transnational higher education in the Sultanate of Oman is examined, with particular reference to quality and by means of primary qualitative research in three selected (case) institutions, each a private sector higher education institution (HEI).

Accordingly, it is important at the outset to explore this concept, noting that policy has two dimensions: formulation and implementation. Between the two dimensions, there is a complex process of interpretation and translation as a result of which outcomes may differ from intentions and plans. Such a reality is at the core of this thesis.

1.5.2 Policy as 'Process'

At the outset, it is important to understand that the meaning of *policy* does not only lie in a written text, but also has to be seen as a process and a discursive one at that (Ball, 1994). In addition, policy implies the existence of a practice or set of practices for which the policy provides (at least) a framework.

The policy process is diversely and repeatedly contested and subject to 'interpretation' (Braun, Maguire and Ball, 2010), though the nature and extent of this will depend on the nature of the *polis* (state) concerned.

As Ham and Hill (1984, pp. 12-13) assert, studies in policy since the 1970s suggest that:

- Policy is a process not just a product
- It is important to recognize action-oriented, bottom-up perspectives on policy, which see those at the workplace as also informing and making policy
- Policy varies in the very process of implementation
- Policy can be seen as more than a specific document and as a pattern of action over a period of time.

Similarly, Taylor et al. (1997) assert, in identifying the important characteristics of a policy, that it is multidimensional, value-laden, existing in a context, and more than a text, and that its implementation is never straightforward, since (for example) education policies interact with policies in other fields and policies can result in unintended as well as intended consequences. Such understanding implies the need to investigate how the Omani government policy of mandating affiliations is received and acted upon in the HE sector. Moreover, such understanding of the meaning of the policy implies a possible discrepancy between the original intentions of the government and the policy's application by HEIs themselves.

According to Ball (2010, p. 126), at nation-state level, policy-making is,

'*inevitably a process of bricolage: a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending locally tried and tested approaches, cannibalising theories, research, trends and fashions and not infrequently flailing around for anything at all that looks as though it might work*'.

Policy is shaped and acted upon by diverse sets of policy actors who adjust, translate and interpret in order to make meaning out of official texts for specific contexts in what is called 'enactment' (Braun, Maguire and Ball, 2010). Making meaning in the policy process involves both 'interpretation' and 'translation', which are interwoven and overlapping. That is, making meaning extends beyond the initial reading to 'make sense' of policy (interpretation), to 'recoding' policy (translation) by enacting and putting policy into practice (Ball et al., 2011). Between the state legislative level and the enactment level there is a complex process of

recontextualization (Bernstein, 1998) in which reproduction of mandated policies takes place (Fitz, Davies and Evans, 2006).

Here, recontextualization refers to 'the relational process of selecting and moving knowledge from one context to another, as well as the distinctive re-organization of knowledge as an instructional and regulative or moral discourse' (Singh, Thomas and Harris, 2013, p. 465). As expressed by Bernstein (1996, p. 24), '*Every time a discourse moves, there is space for ideology to play*'. Conflict and dispute, thus, may result at different levels: national, local or institutional (Offe, 1984). The concept of recontextualization implies that the same policy might be perceived differently in different contexts. Reflecting on the Omani context, this might point to possible variation in the definitions attached to a certain policy.

To that end, *policy enactment* as a concept has drawn the attention of researchers because of the belief that policy-makers do not normally take account of the complexity of policy enactment environments, especially when there are multiple policy demands and expectations to be met (Ball, 1997). In their study of policy enactment at the level of school education, Braun, Maguire and Ball (2010) summarized the above view and concluded that:

'It is important to consider, firstly, that policies are processes, even when mandated, and policy texts can be differently worked on and with. Secondly, policy practices are specific and contextualised. They are framed by the ethos and history of each (institution) and by the positioning and personalities of the key policy actors involved. And thirdly, and related to the contextualised aspect of practice, policies are mediated by positioned relationships (in the case of school-level education) between government and each local authority, the local authority and each of its schools, and within, as well as between schools'.

1.5.3 Policy 'Migration'

Policy may travel or be borrowed not only at the levels mentioned above but also between nations. Policy borrowing is referred to as a '*trend that has accelerated as the move towards global village becomes an increasing reality*' (Halpin and Troyna, 1995, p. 304). When countries encounter turbulent economic and social change, policy-makers search for solutions in the experiences of others that are perceived as successful (Rose, 1991; Roynold and Farrell, 1996). Oman in this respect is no exception considering the various challenges it faces.

The growing literature on policy borrowing, according to Dolowitz and March (2000), describes and analyses the processes involved when policies, as well as institutional, programme and administrative arrangements developed in one political context are used to influence development in another political context.

When it comes to policy borrowing, Steiner-Khamsi (2014) differentiates between normative and analytical directions and asserts that many researchers are likely to be active in both. The normative group of researchers would be interested in using comparison to identify best-performing educational systems to transfer and learn from. The analytical group would be interested in analysing the why and when of the issue and the impact of such imports on existing policies. The following table summarizes the differences:

	Normative	**Analytical**
'Best practices'	Which are the 'best practices' that should be adopted	Whose practices are considered 'best practices'?
Dissemination	How can 'best practices' be effectively disseminated	Under which conditions is dissemination of a practice likely to occur?
Impact of lesson drawing	What has been improved as a result of policy borrowing?	Who benefits, who loses in the act of policy drawing?

Table 1: Normative versus Analytical Question in Policy Borrowing. Adapted from: Steiner-Khamsi (2014, p. 154)

In this research, I try to adopt the analytical approach. Research Questions 3 and 4 are intended in particular to generate insight into benefits and usefulness of TNHE as perceived by the key informants in the institutions, i.e. those at the interface between policy and the student experience.

On a terminological point, the word 'borrowing' has instigated a debate that does not fall far from political and ethical debates related to the concept of policy borrowing itself. For some, '*it assumes an agential relationship that ultimately ends up in the lender owing back what is due to the self*' (Divala, 2014). This understanding implies one party taking advantage of the other, as in the case of donations to third world countries. Others have an issue with the word 'borrowing', as in the case of Dale (1999, p. 9), who describes it as 'misleading' because of its implied assumptions, such as the compatibility of borrower and lender. Others choose to

'*bypass that debate and use "borrowing" to cover the whole range of issues relating to how the foreign example is used by policy makers at all stages of the processes of initiating and implementing educational change*' (Phillips and Ochs, 2003, p. 451).

Some researchers in the field use other words associated with (more or less) the same meaning, such as 'transfer', 'travelling' (Silova 2005), 'emulation', 'imitation', 'copying' (Bennett, 1997), or even 'lending', 'learning', 'appropriation', or 'assimilation'. For the sake of this research, the word 'borrowing' will be used as defined above, with reference to the view of Phillips and Ochs (2004, p. 773) concerning '*the fallacious assumptions behind the notion that policy can simply be transplanted from one national context to the other*'.

Policy borrowing is thus best seen as a deliberate act (Phillips and Ochs, 2004). According to Dale's typology of mechanisms of external effect on national politics (1999, p. 6), policy borrowing is voluntary in nature, explicit in terms of process, and national in term of locus; the source of initiation is the recipient and the nature of the effect is direct on the sector or organization.

Borrowing in this sense is different from 'lesson-drawing' and, according to Dolowitz and March (2000, p. 13), is driven by interest rather than '*coercive transfer' or 'direct imposition of a program, policy or institutional arrangement*'.

Nevertheless, recent literature has shown that policy borrowing is not always explicit in nature. For example, Waldow (2009) in a study conducted in Sweden claims that there is 'silent' borrowing, a non-acknowledged processes of policy transfer, and concludes that

'*Silent borrowing was so prevalent in Sweden for a long time because political culture was characterized by a powerful myth of rationality and national superiority, favouring strategies of legitimation other than explicit borrowing*'.

In education, Phillips (2000, p. 299) describes educational 'borrowing' as '*the most obvious consequence of learning from and understanding what is happening elsewhere*'. Understanding the motives behind looking at others' educational systems is key to understanding this phenomenon. Phillips (1997, p. 673) states that reasons might range

'*from earnest academic (scientific) examination of discrete features of successful educational practice "elsewhere", through more or less serious general consideration of, or casual curiosity about, how other countries organize their education systems, to the cheap political expediency of governments and opposing parties anxious for a range of dubious reasons to demonstrate that education in their country is either under- or over-performing in comparison to other nations'.*

Halpin and Troyna (1995) assert that policy borrowing has become a form of legitimization. When politicians are faced with the pressure of solving existing pressing social problems, they are likely to refer to 'rosy examples elsewhere'. However, the interest in borrowing a policy might lie merely in the message it carries and not necessarily in the content.

Borrowing might happen as a result of actions of other actors than politicians. For example, Steiner-Khamsi (2004) has identified actors whose professions depend on promoting and facilitating the implementation of educational ideas that come from the 'First World' into the 'Third World' via the textbook industry, consulting firms, and most importantly, private institutions specializing in policy transfer implementation and indigenization for the sake of reform. An example would be Non-profit and Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) that make educational policy transfer resemble an entrepreneurial exercise. Such organizations are criticized for the 'imposition' of policy that is insensitive to the receivers' countries and for their exclusion of local experts (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004). The same view is supported by Divala (2014, p. 97), who acknowledges that transferring education policy and practice from one national educational system to another '*might be practically inappropriate, culturally insensitive or appropriate and imposed, exploitative or oppressive*'.

For example, it is claimed that Pakistan is under considerable pressure to align its education policies with a dominant set of definitions of the terms 'efficient', 'efficacious' and 'quality'. Pressure is both material and discursive and has to do with reliance on international aid. Such pressure is linked to being part of the global policy mentioned earlier (Ali, 2013).

Some influential work in this field has been done by Phillips and Ochs, who demonstrate that educational borrowing might be perceived within a continuum of educational transfer from policy that is '**Imposed**' to policy that is '**Introduced Through Influence',** as follows:

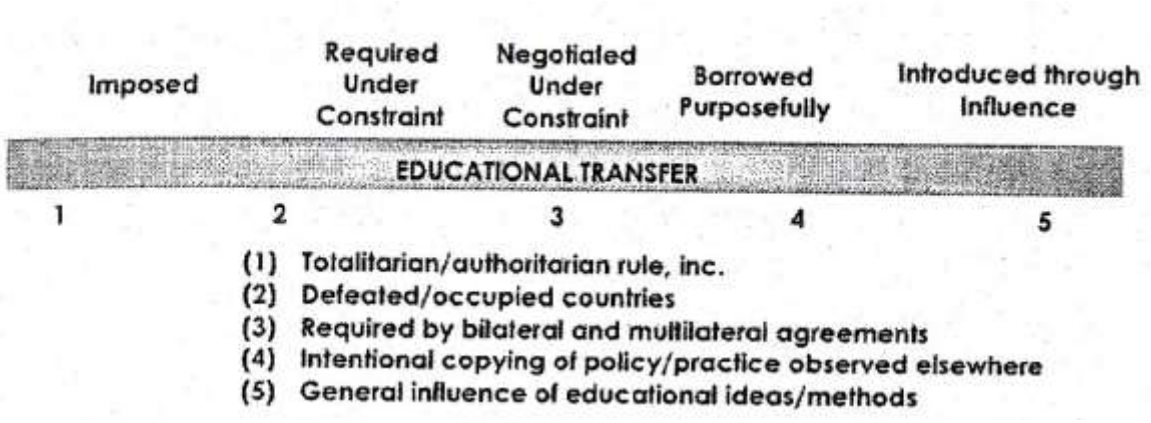

Figure 1: Continuum of Educational Transfer. Adapted from: Phillips and Ochs (2004b, p. 9)

So what could be the reasons behind educational policy (and practice) borrowing in Oman and the other GCC states?

1.5.4 Supra Powers Promoting 'Borrowing'

Education changes over time. In our times, developments are directly or indirectly influenced by international agencies and conversations on education shaped by globalization and internationalization. For example, many countries reacted to UNESCO's *Education for All (EFA)* initiative that was launched in 1990 and further developed in 2000. It acted as a framework, setting targets to be achieved by 2015; 164 countries vowed to achieve the identified goals, aimed at meeting the learning needs of all children, youth and adults.

Similarly, many countries have faced international pressure in the form of published reports of learning outcomes, like the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) report on Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Such reports influenced reforms in various countries including Arab countries. These initiatives are examples of efforts exerted to mobilize countries towards modernization of society through education. Countries are striving to develop their knowledge economies. Quality and excellence in HE are associated with technological advancements and economic prosperity.

In the case of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, which share boundaries, tradition and culture as well as oil wealth, a lot of attention has been paid to developing education and making it available to the citizens.

However, as the region is part of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), education there has been perceived as undergoing a crisis, for three key reasons:

'*an increase in the education disparity within countries, a decrease in the quality of education despite high per capita education expenditure, and a mismatch between labour market needs and the output of educational systems*' (Chapman and Miric, 2009, p. 313).

GCC states have been warned that learning achievements and educational outcomes in the Gulf are lagging behind the levels scored in other regions in the world. Moreover, the 2003 Arab Human Development Report stated that the Arab world is facing a long-term problem when it comes to knowledge capital. The GCC states have been cautioned that building an economy based on revenue generated from oil is risky. Natural resources may be subject to price fluctuation and may not last as expected. Instead, as recommended by OPEC, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in reports from the 1980s onwards, economies should become stabilized through a focus on knowledge production, innovation and development of human capital. Another World Bank report (2008) recommended that the Middle East countries should use education to tackle their pressing issues such as unemployment. Considering the fact that the GCC states have signed agreements such as GATS, by which they are required to change their trade rules (including the way they deal with transnational education), one can argue that there is scope for a third stage of borrowing as per Figure 1 of Phillips and Ochs (2004b); that is, borrowing required by bilateral and multilateral agreements.

As a result, policy-makers in the GCC countries responded to warnings and criticisms by initiating national projects that aim to reform their education systems. Initiatives included moving from full state funding and control over education to allowing the private sector to participate in widening access to education, introducing greater regulation of the education market, increasing competition by inviting international universities to their companies, and paying attention to the quality and accreditation aspects of education. These initiatives are summarized by Abouammoh (2010, p. 3) thus:

'*In most of the GCC states private higher education has been playing an increasing role and has got enormous public support. Joint development programs and initiatives are developed at different levels of the region's authorities … Individual GCC states have introduced various initiatives, by-laws and regulations to coordinate the higher education market. Government*

spending has increased significantly on higher education to motivate measures to improve quality, further private investment and instigate international competition. Academic accreditation or quality assurance bodies are introduced in different forms and structures at the GCC states'.

In the process of reform, the GCC countries have relied on outside agencies to introduce externally designed and often ready-made solutions to solve local problems (Donn and Al Manthari, 2010). Solutions varied from full and partial borrowing of policies, practices, textbooks and consultancy to the physical presence of foreign providers. With reference to Figure 1, the influence of such agencies seems to have relevance to the fifth level of borrowing, namely the general influence of educational ideas and methods, whereas the solutions they came up with in terms of textbooks, policies and practices seem to align with the fourth type of borrowing: intentional copying of policies and practices observed elsewhere.

That being said**,** such dependence on outside forces triggers questions about the suitability and relevance of support received, especially in light of countries' desire to acquire competitive advantage. This point is taken up and developed later in the thesis.

With that in mind, it is important to acknowledge that in the context of globalization, governments have a degree of independence in deciding on their national policies. The dynamics of state power over education systems have changed as a result of the impact of supra powers. Yet, governments still have the ability to control and choose reactions to globalization and international pressures (Mann, 1997)**.**

In fact, Zigarus and McBurnie (2015, p. xvii) argue that choices are shaped in many respects by the way governments regulate and that therefore, '*the actions of millions of individual actors are often those that governments desire'.* Ability to decide suggests variations in choice of education policy not only at national level but also at organization level. For example, when it comes to TNHE in the Omani context, while Oman had to comply with the GATS agreement, inviting TNHE was seen mainly in the form of programme mobility and not in the provider mobility that is more evident in the GCC countries as a whole.

Another Phillips and Ochs (2003) model that helps us to understand policy borrowing and has relevance to the explanation above is one in which they postulate borrowing as a process that

happens in four stages: cross-national attraction, decision, implementation and internationalization/indigenization.

1.5.5 The Enactment of 'Borrowing'

Cross-National Attraction, the first stage, is about 'impulses' and preconditions for borrowing. Examples of 'impulses' would be creeping internal dissatisfaction, systematic collapse as a result of inadequate aspects of educational provision, economic change/challenge, national or international political change, and innovation in skills and knowledge. Borrowed educational policies or practices could take the form of certain processes, strategies, techniques, goals, enabling structures, or guiding philosophy or ideology.

The second stage, Decisions, places decision for change within the following categories:

a) *Theoretical*: decision on policies remains a general ambition without demonstrating effective implementation
b) *Realistic/practical*: successful measures are not related to contextual factors and therefore can be isolated and implemented somewhere else
c) *Quick fix*: considered a dangerous form of decision-making driven by immediate political necessity; could be the result of advice from outside
d) *Phoney*: refers to politicians' enthusiastic attraction to education in other countries for instant political effect without the likelihood of serious follow-through.

In an article, *'The rise and fall of MLT: an example of European policy borrowing*', Chung, Atkin and Moore (2012) discuss the UK government's initiation of a Master's in teaching and learning (MLT) in order to raise the level of teachers. They believe that the failure of the initiative has many causes, including lack of discussion and sharing with stakeholders. They regarded it as another 'quick fix' and 'phoney' because it was introduced just before political elections.

As for Implementation, in this third stage, a foreign model is inevitably adopted depending on many contextual factors such as the parties involved or the degree of accommodation of new ideas. Adoptability of the policy measure and complexity of already established systems play a role in respect of the time needed for change; moreover, change is influenced by 'significant actors' such as bodies' or individuals' decisions at different stages and levels.

Finally, Internalization or Indigenization occurs when a borrowed policy becomes part of the borrower's context and there is the possibility of assessing its impact on the pre-existing activities. That is done in four steps:

1. Impact on the existing system with consideration given to national character (Mallinson, 1975) or cultural relativism (Ball, 1994)
2. The absorption of external features in which the context is examined to see how to adopt features from another system
3. Synthesis, describing how a policy or practice becomes part of the overall strategy
4. Evaluation – reflection to determine realistic and unrealistic expectations of borrowing where evaluation and evaluator are equally important.

Reflecting on the Omani context, there is limited scope for investigating where the decision fits among the four categories mentioned in the decision stage, or the extent to which there is internalization/indigenization, because this research does not focus on policy formulation and the circumstances surrounding decisions. Moreover, the study at the centre of this thesis is not longitudinal research that aims to measure change and impact over time.

In addition, it is worth recognizing the cautions advanced by Ochs (2006, p. 602) regarding the temptation in studies such as this to

1. *caution* against educational reform
2. *glorify* current education at home in comparison to other nations (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004)
3. *legitimate* the adoption or reform of educational policy at home (Halpin & Troyna, 1995; Gonon, 1998; Novoa and Yariv-Mashal, 2003; Steiner- Khamsi, 2004)
4. *scandalize* policy and practice at home, substantiating and validating the need for reform (Steiner-Khamsi, 2004).

That said, a borrowed foreign policy text including contextualized practices might be:

1. Employed as an exemplar for *innovation* involving new practices at home (Turbin, 2001; Ochs and Phillips, 2002a, b)
2. Used to inspire policy *reform*, which might include the termination of existing home policies

3. Used to *converge* or *unite* educational reform with global initiatives, such as Education for All or the Millennium Development Goals, for example
4. Borrowed to *enhance* the country's ability to compete internationally.

To summarize the foregoing, in regard to the emergence of a global policy, with policy borrowing motivated by the wish to 'converge' or 'unite' educational reforms with global initiatives, there seems to be broader consensus on preferred education policy priorities (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010). This consensus is reinforced by certain international bodies that seem to dictate what education should look like and by what means, arguably creating a form of global standardization.

'One might assume that the GCC's current trend towards internationalization and privatization in higher education contributes to this catching-up process, as suggested by the World Bank and other multinational organizations. These new educational services promise the required exponential growth to reach the knowledge level of advanced economies, in qualitative and quantitative terms' (Brandenburg, 2013, p. 290).

As Donn and Al Manthari (2013, p. 20) put it,

'The education reforms that are successful in one context – the so called "best practice" – reflect one tangent of this emerging global policy. Another tangent is represented by the emerging trend of global comparative indices such as the progress on Education for all (EFA) targets, Millennium Development Goals (MDG) targets, performance on international tests like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS)'.

An example would be the attention Finland has received as a result of its success in *PISA*. Such continuous top performance has drawn the attention of many other countries (including UK), motivating them to find out about the successful features of its education system in order to emulate and transfer it (Chung, 2009).

Such powerful influences challenge national agendas for education and may change what education is all about. For example, Altbach (2002a, p. 2) noted that education is increasingly becoming an internationally traded commodity and no longer seen as '*a set of skills, attitudes*

and values required for citizenship and effective participation in modern society'. Moreover, education has become market oriented as a result of being linked to the economy.

In fact, Rappleye (2006) believes that organizations like the World Bank can be criticized for their insensitivity to contexts, although they are actively engaged in transfer. He asserts that deeper understanding of the issue requires moving from *content* to *context*.

As already noted, the phenomenon of policy borrowing is relatively new in Oman and limited research has been done on it as yet. That said, this research benefits from recent work done in the GCC countries in the area of policy borrowing, mainly by Donn and Al Manthari (2010 and 2013). The authors confirm that GCC countries have participated in the global conversation about reforming their education. They have welcomed international higher education providers and cross-border education. They have similarly created higher education councils, quality assurance systems, etc.

The GCC countries were, in fact, approached by what Donn and Al Manthari (2013, p. 20) call '*key players',* with reference to bodies as the World Trade Organization, the European Union and the World Bank, who, *'acting under the principles of the market and new-liberalism, had encouraged the Gulf States to transform their education systems from historical and indigenous to current and global'*.

While the researchers have no problem with countries changing outdated systems, they showed concerns regarding the speed at which new forms were introduced in areas such as governance, curriculum, assessment and quality. Moreover, they worry that what these countries are offered is simply a 'quick fix' to deliver outcomes that later on may '*result in further social and political desperation leading to an urgent need to find yet another education reform*'.

Donn and Al Manthari (2013, p. 9) describe the issue as follows:

'*The reforms are often borrowed (or lent) with the idea behind them tending to have been tested elsewhere, usually in a developed country. Middle Eastern policy makers would say; "We should borrow tested education reforms to achieve excellence in educational outcomes; or from a different standpoint we should lend the tested ideas to nations in need of development*"'.

The argument is essentially that the problem has less to do with education itself and more to do with the generation and sustainability of knowledge and the ability to compete in the 'knowledge economy'. This may be the case, considering that these countries are regarded as consumers of knowledge, not to mention that what is borrowed now in one place is likely to have already been consumed and become outdated somewhere else. Consequently, the seller gets the advantage of being ahead with knowledge and with money from selling, while the buyer is left with solutions developed by others for their own contexts, which fail to contribute to the buyer's context.

Concerns also cover the extent to which quality is assured through all these imports. For example, according to Knight (2013, p. 171), one important yet controversial aspect of internationalization is cross-border education. Moreover, '*Changes to the higher education landscape in the Gulf countries are startling and much of the transformation is due to cross-border academic mobility*'. While the author asserts that the scope and volume of activity are growing, she highlights that there are still some unanswered questions. For example, does cross-border education increase access to higher education? As the number and types of cross-border providers and delivery modes grow, is the quality of the academic offering ensured? Are cross-border education and research based on strong partnerships that respect national contexts and priorities? (Knight, 2013, p. 172)

This concern seems to be in line with the idea expressed by Altbach (2006, p. 24), that '*In a world divided into centre and peripheries, the centre grows stronger and more dominant and the peripheries become increasingly marginalized*'. For Donn and Al Manthari (2013, p. 9), there is a paramount need that '*such policy transfer – either borrowed or lent – be investigated'*.

In short, there is a need to investigate the reasons behind borrowing a certain policy such as transnational higher education with its embedded quality system, and to assess the possibility of integrating it within the importer's system. Attention should be paid to challenges arising from the context, especially for a relatively new educational system that is expanding rapidly such as the Omani educational system, as will be seen in Chapter 2.

This concern arises in light of the emphasis, in Michael Porter's widely quoted book entitled *The Competitive Advantage of Nations* (1990), on the importance of knowledge creation.

Porter goes against the common and classic economic understanding that a nation's advantage rests on productive regulation of its market and access to its natural resources. Instead, he places high importance on the localized process of creating and sustaining innovation. Competitive success is not isolated from a country's history, national values, economic structure and institutions. In this sense, he declares his opposition to standardization of the models that nations may adopt. Reflection on this view raises the question of whether borrowing policies is likely to benefit Oman in the longer term.

1.6 Overview of the Thesis

This study has nine chapters. Chapter 1 has provided an introduction and brief overview together with a short account of my personal and professional motivation for undertaking the research, and an exposition of the concept of policy borrowing as the lens through which the topic is explored. It has also highlighted aspects of the potential significance of the study in both academic and practice-focused domains.

Chapter 2 focuses on Oman as the context for the research and on the development of its education system, with particular reference to higher education. It aims to shed light on the circumstances within which TNHE was invited to Oman and the issues associated with this development.

The following two chapters explore the twin key conceptual and theoretical frameworks used in this study, and incorporate reviews of the relevant literature.

Chapter 3 provides an analysis of the concept of quality assurance in order to demonstrate the complexity of the process of defining it, a complexity that increases when the dimension of cross-border, transnational partnership is added.

Chapter 4 discusses the development, forms and challenges of TNHE and how it has changed perceptions towards and expectations and experiences of higher education.

Chapter 5 outlines the process whereby the research questions addressed in this study emerged. It sets out the thinking on methodology that informed the operationalization of the research, including the design of the data collection, the analysis and presentation of the data. The role of the pilot study (the first phase) as a formative influence on the main study is also addressed in this chapter.

The research findings are presented in two chapters. Chapter 6 provides an overview of the data analysis, which is presented to help gain insight into the situation in the three case universities. Moreover, it presents an analysis of the outcomes from the semi-structured interviews with a sample of academic staff from the three institutions (the second phase), adopting a thematic approach to this step and combining it with a case-by-case analysis.

Chapter 7 reports findings from the third phase, the interviews with policy-makers that were used to interrogate the findings from the second stage and to help in focusing interpretation of the data on the national, policy level.

Chapter 8 contains a review and discussion of the findings, with reference to both the literature and the research questions, and Chapter 9 presents the conclusions and recommendations.

A series of annexes presents further information on the approach taken to analysis of the data, with samples of interview transcripts.

Chapter 2: Context for the Research: Higher Education in Oman

2.1 Introduction

This chapter aims to explain the context for the research by providing some essential background on Oman and the development of its education system.

In what follows, section 2.2 will provide a short description of the location and nature of Oman. These are important both for understanding its higher education system and the issues that it currently faces, and hence for understanding the rationale for this study. There will be some brief references to Oman's history and culture, as these too are relevant.

In section 2.3, the key features of development of Oman's educational system in general will be outlined before attention is shifted to the country's higher education provision and its rapid development and expansion. Although the separate development over centuries of school-level education and of post-school education might make inclusion in a study of higher education treatment of school-level education an irrelevance, the very short history of formal education provision and the intertwined development of schools and post-school provision together make Oman a somewhat unusual – indeed arguably a unique – context.

The complexities arising from this setting will therefore be considered as key issues relevant to this study and will be introduced as a prelude to discussion of the situation of private sector higher education in section 2.4. This will be followed by section 2.5, which covers the rationales that gave rise to the emergence of Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) affiliation with its different modes and approaches, the focus of this thesis. The current challenges of TNHE affiliation will also be considered in section 2.6, as a springboard from which to set out the aims of the research and the research questions. Section 2.7 will cover the way Oman assures its quality. Finally, section 2.8 will summarize the key dimensions discussed in this chapter.

The chapter draws on a selection of the relevant literature, comprising book and journal article material, other research studies, official documentation and institutional material, with all sources identified both at the point of use and in the References section of the thesis. The critical review of the literature and conceptual frameworks informing this research are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4.

2.2 The Context of Oman

The influence of outside forces has been a key factor in the development of Oman for almost a hundred years since the British gained a toehold in the country in 1920, although the country's geographic location (Figure 1) has made it a more culturally diverse place than other Gulf states, particularly due to its successes between the 17th and 19th centuries when its Sultanate controlled a significant empire stretching across the Indian Ocean and as far as Zanzibar to the south.

Thus, although Oman is similar in many respects to other Gulf Arab countries, it differs in a number of ways as a consequence of the cultural diversity found there both in its history and in its current large expatriate population that comes with the expatriate population (Table 25,

Annex G). This diversity is explained in the following section and captured in this research sample as illustrated in Chapter 5.That said, indigenous Omani society is, according to schemes of classification of cultures such as that developed by Hofstede (1984), 'tribal-collectivist', and quite heavily rule- and protocol-oriented. Like the other GCC states, Oman is also an Islamic society and the values of Islam permeate both private and public life. Consciousness of the nature of indigenous Omani society as depicted by Hofstede and others can help explain some aspects of the way in which the regulation and governance of higher education in Oman has been developed and how it operates. However,
for better understanding of the way in which core characteristics of Omani indigenous culture impact on perceptions, attitudes and behaviours in and around higher education, the way in which higher education 'imports' from other very different cultures are perceived in Oman and the way in which they are interpreted and responded to is something that should be examined in a sustained piece of research. However, this is beyond the scope of the study at the centre of this thesis, which does not include the process of policy formulation.

While the above factors are important to acknowledge, in the current context of globalization, governments do have a degree of independence in deciding their national policies. This is so despite the fact that the dynamics of state power over education systems have changed as a result of the impact of supra-national bodies and global trends. Governments still have the ability to control and choose reactions to globalization and international pressures (Mann, 1997)**.**

Complementing the notion of a deep-rooted cultural influence, Zigarus and McBurnie (2015, p. xvii) refer to, '*the actions of millions of individual actors'* in the way governments regulate. The perceptions, views and behaviours of both individual institutions and individual staff within them, besides choice of regulation, are critical factors that have relevance to this thesis.

Oman is located in a strategically important location on the Arabian Peninsula. It is the second largest country by land area in this region, after Saudi Arabia. Modern Omani development is marked by the ascension to the throne of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos in 1970.

According to Scholz, (2013, p. vi),

'*In the late 1960s, Oman ranked among the most backward countries on earth … With the discovery of petroleum and on the basis of its commercial exploitation (1969), as well as with*

the takeover of government by the young Sultan Qaboos bin Said (1970), a totally new phase in the social, political, infrastructural and economic development of Oman started'.

The pace and extent of change since then is reflected in the fact that by 2012, the World Bank ranked Oman among its first 50 member countries according to the Knowledge Economy Index. Oman is also ranked among the high-income countries, according to the World Trade Organization (2015).

As mentioned, Oman is an oil dependent country, but there are plans to reduce such dependence and replace it with an economy that fosters human development by shifting at least some of the economic base to services and encouraging diversification. This has profound implications for higher education, as does the nature of the current population in Oman.

Figure 2: Oman Geographical Location

Source: www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/oman-map.htm

The total indigenous Omani population is around 2 million, with almost 50% under the age of 18 (Table 26, Annex G). There is also a population of 1.6 million expatriates (Table 25, Annex G), a common feature of the total population of most of the Gulf States

As with the rest of the GCC states, Oman has a high level of dependence on expatriate workers to drive growth. The inflow of expatriates started during the 1970s when Oman had a workforce that was not yet ready to face the new challenges associated with modernization.

'While the new Omani regime strove to achieve rapid socio-economic development, the relatively small and unskilled national workforce required a massive import of foreign workers, which from the early 1980s onwards constituted the majority of Oman's total labour force.' (Winckler, 2000, p. 23)

The majority of foreign workers in Oman come from Arab and Asian countries, mainly the Indian sub-continent. They are of different ethno-religious, socio-professional and regional origins (Pradhan, 2013) and '*come to Oman for diverse reasons, such as political unrest in their countries of origin or in search of work and better opportunities. They settled in Oman and blended in the society, contributing to its development and welfare*' (Al Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova, 2013).

However, after decades of investment in education, the presence of expatriate workers is now perceived as a symptom of limited success in developing skills needed for the market (Booz and Company, 2010) and as posing a challenge to the education system in general, and higher education in particular.

A further critical factor lies in the relatively high proportion of the Oman's population whom are under 30 years of age and an increasing birth rate.The percentage of population of school age up to 14 (pre-secondary) is about 34% of the total Omani population. Combined with secondary school students (up to 18), the number is likely to exceed 40%.

The fast growth witnessed in the last few decades and reflected in the above numbers carry implications in terms of availability of public services, mainly health care and education

2.3 The Development of Education in Oman

Generally speaking, education in Oman has witnessed phenomenal growth and development since 1970, to the extent that *'Oman stands as a model in terms of development of its education system considering the phenomenal growth it has experienced in the last two decades commonly described as massive, unprecedented and unsurpassed by any other country'* (Al Shmeli, 2009).

In 1970, education in Oman was limited to only three schools. These offered education in a simple form taught in the Arabic language, along with some religious education. According to the Ministry of Education (2003), the number of secondary school graduates in 1976 (age 17-

18) was only 58. Within 10 years (1985) it had increased to 2,591; by 1995, it was 15,943; and by 2003, 41,573.

The enormous shift in relation to education in Oman was directly influenced by His Majesty (HM) Sultan Qaboos bin Said's vision and directions. As a result, only twenty years from the beginning of his era, the country celebrated the graduation in 1990 of the first batch of students from the first state university, which was opened in 1986.

Oman has succeeded in demonstrating sustained growth in educational provision, particularly in terms of school provision, with nearly 2,000 state schools supplemented by some 500 private and around 40 foreign/'international' schools.

Such a level of provision is supported by considerable state spending on education which in terms of school-level provision alone almost tripled between 2006 and 2015 as can be seen in Table 26 (Annex G), with expenditure now exceeding US$ 2 million annually. The table also presents the percentage share from total government expenditure on education compared to overall total expenditure of the government, which indicates the Omani government's commitment towards education. The total government expenditure on education (% of Total Government expenditure) in Oman is the highest in 2015 at 9.6% compared to 6.8% in the year 2012. The table also shows that an average of 8.19% share of government expenditure is maintained on education across the years (2006-2015).

This is an important reflection of a desire to achieve higher standards in education and, according to the Ministry of Education's mission, which reflects the government's realization that education is an important agent, perhaps **the** key agent, of national development:

'*to prepare a generation capable of carrying the nation's economic and social development duties … (Gearing) … all facilities, curricula, evaluation systems and high quality working force to serve all pupils in various education sectors along with deployment of modern technologies proportionate to the Digital Oman Community Strategy. … orchestrating all efforts … by the private sector and the community to serve education, devising the way to powerful and modern consistent modernization contiguous with civilized nations'. (MoE, 2016)*

The above growth requires alignment with tertiary education in terms of resources and infrastructure to accommodate students movement towards college and university level of education.

A closer look at the educational development over time shows that it went from a quantitative emphasis in the decade from 1970, to a more qualitative emphasis from 1980 onwards (Rassekh, 2004). It can be argued that the difference in emphasis reflects changes in directions and thinking on how education could support the national agenda.

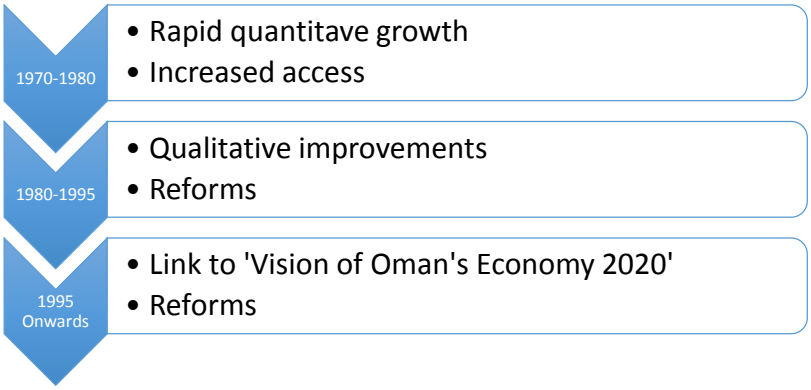

Figure 3: Educational Development in Oman. Adapted from: Issan and Gomaa (2010)

As seen in Figure 3, the post-1970 Omani renaissance aimed to provide general (pre-tertiary) education at all levels to as many students as possible: with primary, preparatory and secondary education for all, especially at the primary level during the first stage. The priorities were to reverse low literacy and schooling levels, absorb the growing masses of young people, and reduce urban-rural inequalities (Brandenburg, 2013).

After 1980, however, the focus shifted from quantitative to qualitative when the time came to review the progress and implications of Stage 1. The focus was on evaluating some major areas such as teacher training and teaching, curriculum and infrastructure.

The third shift, 1995 onwards, can be linked to education policy and globalization. As mentioned above, international reports addressing the GCC countries' economic situation have caught the attention of policy makers in Oman too. '*The challenges of globalization, information technology, sustainable economic transformation, expansion of global knowledge, and the development of human skills are becoming essential prerequisites for Omani society's progress*' (Issan and Gomaa, 2010, p. 19).

The qualitative focus in Stage 3 also became more consciously articulated after educational requirements were linked to the outcome from the *Conference on Oman's Economic Future, Vision 2020*. The vision for the Omani economy in 2020, which aims at achieving the status of 'Newly Industrialized Economy', is based on balanced and sustainable economic growth assisted by sub-strategies that aim to develop human resources, diversify the economy, develop the private sector and enhance social justice (Ministry of Development, 1997). The linkage of economic success with the need for quality education that is capable of producing qualified, skilled and trained human resources is highlighted both in policy and in the literature (see for example Porter, 1990).

The desire to develop human resources is similarly driven by the realization that Oman has to prepare itself to move to a post-oil economy supported by a highly educated workforce.

Moreover, such development seems to align with the national policies of Omanization which aim to decrease the relatively high dependence on an expatriate workforce, as shown in Table 25 (Annex G), by not only increasing the number of Omani nationals in employment but also enhancing their presence at the higher and middle levels of the workforce.

Such linkage called for reforms in the curriculum and educational structure as the focus shifted to science subjects, improvement of English language teaching, improved teaching methods, better training and so on, while continuing to absorb larger numbers of students in both pre-tertiary and tertiary education. In addition and most importantly in terms of this thesis, a heavy onus was placed on higher education institutions in Oman in terms of the country's future knowledge and skill requirements on one hand and regarding Oman's young people realizing their potential on the other.

Such developments as raising enrolment rates and literacy that have been witnessed in Oman are similar to those in the other GCC countries. When it comes to reform initiatives, Oman was no exception to the global trends. For example, Al Balushi and Griffiths (2013, p. 108) state that educational development in Oman is influenced by international 'tidal waves', referred to as 'borrowing', as illustrated in Figure 4.

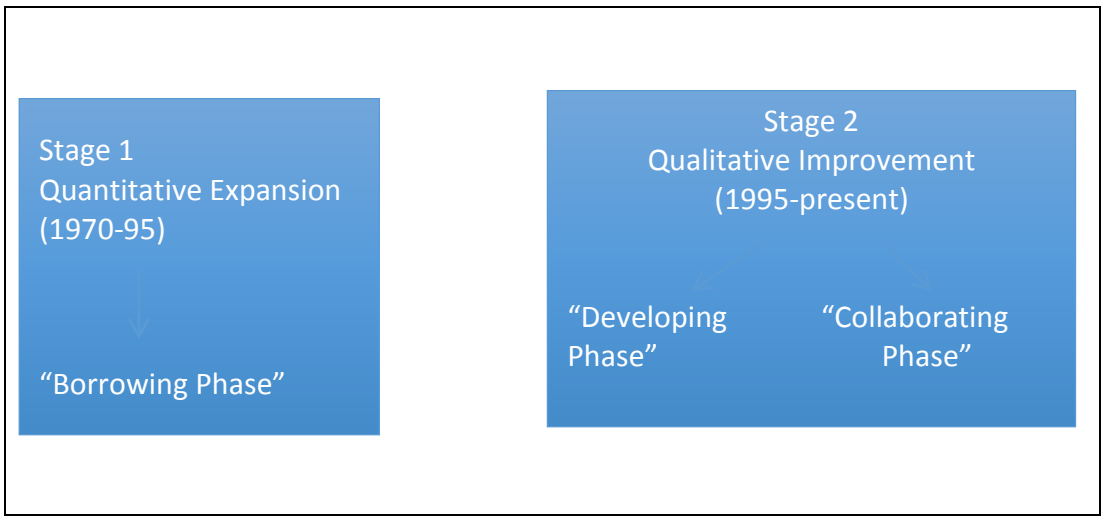

Figure 4: Stages in the Development of (School-Level) Education in Oman

These authors assert that 'borrowing' was evidently seen in Oman in the Omani school system in the period from 1970 to 1995 when textbooks and curriculum were lifted in their entirety from other Arab countries. The *'Borrowing Phase'* was also evidenced in 1980 when experts were brought to Oman from neighbouring Arab countries (mainly Egypt and Jordan) to write textbooks.

However, those textbooks were in fact heavily influenced by the experts' own contexts. Borrowing continued in Stage 2, but this time, between 1995 and the mid to late 2000s, with reliance on experts from the United Kingdom and North America who trained Omani personnel to develop curriculum and assessment material. It is claimed that a new *'Collaborating Phase'* started around 2010, when, locally, the experts in the field were to take on the role of developing the system further. It may be that higher education in Oman is still in the equivalent of Stage 2 of development as experienced in the country's school sector, given for example, that OAAA itself is still dependent on foreign experts for development of its quality systems and criteria.

While the above diagrammatic schema (Figure 4) provides a helpful lens through which to consider the development process, it is clear that some educational developments cannot be strictly categorized as Stage 1 or 2. In fact, the subject of this research, which investigates borrowing of practices in the area of quality assurance in transnational partnerships, can be considered a combination of Stages 1 and 2, whereby solutions are brought in readymade, and experts are brought in not only to provide solutions but also to train and work with local expertise to develop systems and solutions, as will be explained later.

To conclude, this section reveals that the rapid growth and development of education in Oman is linked to rationales related to the national agenda of advancing economy. Moreover, we learn that educational development has been achieved with external support. 'Borrowing' solutions in the process of development is not limited to this stage. However, it will again be seen in the higher education stage, as will be discussed in the following sections.

2.4 Higher Education in Oman

Higher education in Oman has been shaped by several factors. However, the three key forces are Privatization, Internationalization and Accreditation.

To begin with, privatization has been considered during times when public (ie state) universities were no longer capable of absorbing student demand. In Oman, this inability was initially linked to the reduction in oil revenue during the 1980s.The growth of pre-tertiary education outpaced the growth of the higher post-secondary education, creating a discrepancy between demand and supply.

For example, within the 3 years from the academic year 1995/96 to the academic year 1998/99, the number of secondary school graduates jumped from 19,000 to 32,000 (Ministry of Education, 1998). Such demographic expansion caused a large number of secondary school graduates to compete for a limited number of places in higher education (Al Lamki, 2002).

In the academic year 1998-1999 the tertiary education sector in Oman comprised fourteen health institutions, six colleges of education, five technical colleges, one institute of banking, one Sharia and Law College and one public university housing seven different colleges (namely the college of Medicine, Science, Education, Engineering, Agriculture, Commerce & Economy and Arts). All these were public government-funded organizations that offered education free of charge to Omani citizens.

Collectively, in the academic year 1998-1999, the existing 28 tertiary institutions were able to absorb only 6286 students (20%) out of a total of 32,000 secondary school graduates (Al

Lamki, 2002). With limited scholarships granted yearly then (about 100 a year), the predicament was evident.

The resultant challenge was to be addressed in part by focusing on the private sector (Donn and Issan, 2007). In 1999, Royal Decree No. 41/99 was issued to help sort out the issue of access to HE by promoting the development of private higher education. The private sector was allowed to establish colleges and universities. Expectations were that this sector would take the initiative in setting up projects of high value that would help to create job opportunities and diversify the economy (Al Lamki, 2007). For example, it was reported that in 2001, the percentage of unemployment in the Omani labour force was 11.9% (Donn and Al Manthari, 2010). Despite rapid economic growth, the situation got worse: in 2008 it increased to 15% compared to, for example, 13% and 14% in Saudi Arabia and the UAE respectively.

Allowing the participation of the private sector is seen as a solution that offered forms of 'relief' to the government (Al Barawani, Ameen and Chapman, 2011, p. 134). Financially, owners of PHEIs, or their shareholders, invest an amount of money in anticipation of financial return. Moreover, PHEIs can charge students fees that contribute towards retrieval of part of their overall running cost, an advantage that is not enjoyed equally by public HEIs, which cost the government a considerable amount of capital to run. Furthermore, graduates of PHEIs are expected to find jobs outside the government sector and therefore, get no assurance from the government of becoming employed in the public sector.

These rationales are reflected by Al Harthi (2011) in his thesis *Private Higher Education in the Sultanate of Oman: Rationales, Development and Challenges*. He concludes that the government interest in private higher education is to reduce the cost, to reduce the gap between the number of students qualified to enter post-secondary education and places available for them, to comply with the country's vision of a diversified economy by qualifying citizens, and to meet expectations of the private sector being active in scientific research.

The government encouraged this policy by offering multiple generous incentives such as subsidy schemes, allocation of land for construction, and loan provision with subsidized interest rates, which led to a mushrooming of private colleges and universities.

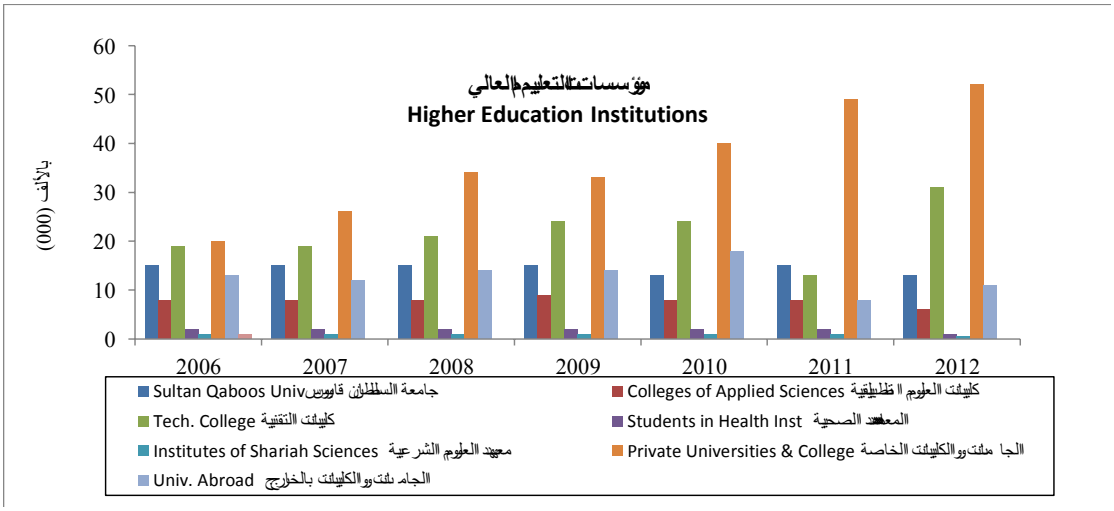

Figure 5: Increase in the Number of Private Higher Education Institutions and their Student Numbers in Context. Source: National Centre for Statistics and Information, Statistical Year Book (2014)

Unlike public higher education institutions, the number of private organizations increased considerably, as seen in Tables 2 and 3. This explains why, following the decree establishing private higher education, another Royal Decree (No. 70/2000) was issued to establish the Directorate General of Private Universities and Colleges for the purpose of overseeing the functioning of private institutions.

	08/09	**09/10**	**10/11**	**11/12**	**12/13**
Sultan Qaboos University (000)	15	15	13	15	13
Colleges of Applied Sciences	6	6	6	6	6
Students (000)	*8*	*9*	*8*	*8*	*6*
Technical Colleges	7	7	7	7	7
Students (000)	*21*	*24*	*24*	*13*	*31*
College of Banking and Financial Studies*	1556	1718	1530	1986	1596
Health Institutions	13	13	16	16	16
Students (000)	*1*	*2*	*2*	*2*	*2*

Institute of Shariah Sciences	1	1	1	1	1
Students (000)	*0.9*	*0.9*	*0.9*	*0.9*	*0.5*
Private Universities and Colleges	24	24	27	27	27
Students (000)	*34*	*33*	*40*	*49*	*52*
Students Studying in Universities Abroad (000)	*14*	*14*	*18*	*8*	*11*

Table 2: Numbers of Institutions and Students in Higher Education in Oman. Source: National Centre for Statistics and Information, Statistical Year Book (2014)

* The author's own institution and that used in the pilot study

The table above shows that the private sector grew to consist of 27 institutions by 2013. It also reveals the large number of students, over 50,000, that the private sector succeeded in absorbing. As a strategy, it is considered a successful solution that has reduced the pressure on public institutions while still widening access to higher education.

One of the major accomplishments of the OAAA (formerly the OAC), as indicated above, was to classify the HEIs and redefine the responsibilities and the relationships between the key players in the sector.

The HEIs were placed into three distinctive categories in the 2004 *Requirements for Oman's System of Quality Assurance (ROSQA*) document: *University* as a category, *University College* as another category and *College of Higher Education* including an *academy* or *institute* as a third category, whether public or private.

Substantial research engagement, for example, is a key defining requirement in the classification of a University, because of the high emphasis placed on the research role as a means of economic development in the Sultanate's Five Year Plans.

The *Classification of Institutions* illustrated the kinds of institution, the awards each kind can offer, the expected scale of activities, and the way each type of institution is established and legitimized, including the procedures for approval and accreditation. The result was a clear map of the HE provision in Oman. Table 3 below summarizes the recognized HEIs as currently listed on the OAAA website in 2014 (www.oac.gov.om):

	Classification	Number of Organizations
1.	Public Health Institute	16
2.	Private College	15
3.	Public College of Technology	7
4.	Public Institute	7
5.	Public College of Applied Science	6
6.	Private University	4
7.	Private University College	4
8.	Public University	1
9.	Public College of Banking and Financial Studies	1
	Total	61

Table 3: OAAA Classification of HEIs

It is worth mentioning that different authorities govern the higher education sector such as the Supreme Council of Planning, the Education Council and the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE).

Chaired by His Majesty Sultan Qaboos, the Supreme Council of Planning (Royal Decree No. 30 /2012), is mandated with power and authority to develop required comprehensive policies and strategies to achieve sustainable development in light of natural and human resources available and set the foundation for economic cooperation with other countries, regional and international organization.

Royal Decree No. 48/2012 on the establishment of the Education Council states that among its responsibilities, it sets (in collaboration with other specialized councils) general policies for education in its different forms and levels. It ensures compliance with the State's overall policies, develop a strategy for education, evaluate quality of education in its different forms, link the country's education programmes and specializations with labour market, approve establishment of educational institutions, develop curricula and education program policies.
In January 1994, Royal Decree 2/1994 separated the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) from the Ministry of Education. Strategic objectives of the MoHE include meeting the ever-growing demand for seats in HEI, increase efficiency of HEIs to achieve high quality standards

and align with social and economic development and national and global trends. They supervise the private HEIs and their partnership agreements.

Despite the fact that policy setting starts at the national level with the Supreme Council of Planning and the Education Council, the higher educational system emerging from the classification seen in Table 3 is still one of considerable complexity. This is due to the existence of multiple supervising authorities, as the public HEIs fall under different jurisdictions, namely: the Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Manpower, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Defense, The Central Bank of Oman, Royal Oman Police, and the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs (Al Shmeli, 2009). These ministries supervise their HEIs, give them direction and work with them to implement new regulations. They can also investigate complaints and impose penalties on HEIs in case of inadequate performance.This diversity indicates a not insignificant challenge in terms of uniformity of regulation and approaches to improving quality and performance.

Multiplicity and complexity can be seen also in quality assurance arrangements. For example, according to the audit portfolio reports published by OAAA on the operation of HEIs in Oman, HEIs that come under the Ministry of Manpower (MoM), in this case Higher Colleges of Technology (HTCs), have to comply with the Ministry's QA arrangements. The Quality Assurance Department (QAD) that is located in MoM oversees the quality management systems in all the seven colleges in a centrally managed fashion. However, private higher education institutions have to comply with requirements of a similar QA office located within the *Directorate-General of Private Universities and Colleges* in the MoHE and the same can be said of nursing institutions and the Ministry of Health.

All in all, the HE sector in Oman is thus diverse and interdependent. The diversity of governing bodies implies a challenge in terms of uniformity of regulation and approaches to the improvement of quality and performance. However, as will be explained in section 2.6,it is strongly influenced by the OAAA, which is the accrediting authority

2.5 Internationalization of Higher Education in Oman: Transnational Partnership and the Pursuit of Quality

As mentioned above, student demand outpaced the growth of public sector (state) Higher Education provision, so that the public sector was unable to absorb the requisite numbers. This problem was 'solved' by allowing the establishment of private higher education. Yet, the

expansion process is linked to concerns about quality of provision, especially when regulations fall short of the necessary quality control. In this context TNHE was perceived as providing solutions and helping to improve the quality of higher education. Oman's concerns about the decline of quality that accompanies widening access seems to be in line with the literature (Altbach, 2008), while simultaneously giving rise to tensions as to whether to consider education a public or a private good.

Once more, the policy-makers looked outside the country for solutions that came wrapped in the Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) package. TNHE is a term used widely to refer to education in which learners are not located in the awarding country (UNESCO and Council of Europe, 2001). Literature highlights that TNHE is sometimes seen as

'*a means for developing countries rapidly to boost the capacity building of their education systems by accessing the world's most advanced education systems, thereby accelerating the process of human capacity building and therefore economic development*' (McBurnie and Ziguras, 2007, p. 1).

Capacity building means increasing self-reliance and decreasing dependence on outsourcing and foreign supply. This implies that advanced systems which have successfully proved to achieve results in their home country promise solutions to less advanced countries which hope to resolve issues in their education systems. In this sense, foreign systems are equated with quality. Educational quality, in the term's most common use, refers to the extent to which an education system is capable of achieving generally accepted educational goals. Improving quality means improving students' achievement in terms of transmission of cognitive knowledge and development of relevant employment skills, which promote civic engagement (Chapman et al., 2005; Fuller, 1987; Adams, 1993). This understanding implies quality in its transformative aspect that results in changes in attitude and productivity.

Wilkinson and Al Hajri (2007) believe that the rationale behind inviting TNHE in the form of affiliations was the belief in this measure as a solution to ensure quality. The same view is supported by Al Barawani et al. (2011), who summarize the rationales behind the decision to induce PHEIs to affiliate with foreign partners (p. 133) as follows: '"*outsourcing" of quality assurance (to) provide(s) credibility and, often, a mechanism for capacity development*'. They perceive the act of affiliation as '*pairing local higher education institutions (HEIs) with well-established international counterparts'.* The Omani government's shift of policy obligating

the private sector to pair with recognized, top 100 universities represents one attempt to regulate the sector in the presence of foreign providers.
It is believed that transnational partnership can ensure that the achievements of students in the Omani HEIs are comparable/equivalent to those of students at the international partner institutions (Ameen, Chapman and Al Barawani, 2010).

An internationally earned degree promises mobility, employability and prestige, privileges that a local degree may not be able to offer. Expectations are usually that in order to assure quality and comparability of students, the partner would, according to the agreement with the local HEI, be to some extent involved in certain activities such as: the appointment of administrative and teaching staff, determination of the individual course content and the overall curriculum, and oversight of the examination process.

Another reason why affiliation promises quality is that the international universities acting as partners to Oman local universities are expected to be accredited. Accreditation as a concept seems to promise quality of provision, among other things.

Having an accredited partner is perceived by some Omani HEIs as a strategy that supports the achievement of their objectives. For example, one HEI has mentioned in its mission statement that it exists to provide quality education in its field and, in this case, '*The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority commends the (X College) for its well-established affiliations with internationally accredited business schools which directly support its Mission'* (HEI Audit Report).

Consequently, the PHEIs have started to actively seek partnerships with universities from different countries. The current affiliation situation in Oman pertaining to PHEIs (2014/2015) is detailed in Table 24 (Annex G).

Such active involvement in TNHE partnerships suggests that HEIs in Oman are participating in internationalization and are part of a globalized movement. In fact, internationalization is known to be an implication of globalization (Van Damme, 2000; Scott, 2000). The varied mobility of people, programmes, providers, services and policy is associated with the movement of TNHE to Oman.

Nationally, at the government level, such involvement appears to be motivated by different rationales. First, as mentioned earlier, such a strategy aligns with the government's wish not only to build human capacity but also to improve the quality of the national HE system and move away from traditional education. Second, Table 24 (Annex G) reflects the considerable involvement of PHEI with international academic partners and the various programmes offered. The increase in diversity and quality of programmes provided by international partners is expected to attract more students (Harthi, 2011) and therefore, to help redirect some potential students, and the demand they present, from the public to the private sector.

At an institutional level, the HEIs in Oman are likely to be involved with partners in different forms of teaching and learning and types of curriculum. The possession of international partners is also expected to boost activities related to research and extracurricular activities, and in this sense may help to improve national education systems, knowledge production and innovation. Furthermore, such diversity is likely to contribute to an increase in learning opportunities and can be perceived as a move away from traditional education.

That being said, along with the many opportunities and benefits, there is the possibility of facing various issues closely linked to standardization and quality in cross-border provision that can be perceived mainly at organizational and national level.

At the institutional level, a single HEI in Oman may have partnerships with different universities from the same country and/or from different countries. The majority of PHEIs have 2 partnerships, many of them have partnerships with about four different international universities, and one is involved with up to 10 universities from 7 different countries. While the multiplicity suggests qualitative growth and variations in services and benefits received, it equally raises questions about the mechanisms available not only to control all these partnerships but also to maximize benefits and ensure value for money. Benefits can include individual gains, support in professional development, and transferral of best practice for academics, learners and administrative staff. Moreover, the multiplicity indicates the need to consider the amount paid in fees to these partners, especially considering that these PHEIs received public funds as incentives. In other words, accountability issues are involved.

At the national level, the table shows that 17 countries are active partners in higher education in Oman (US, UK, Australia, Lebanon, Jordan, Austria, India, Netherlands, Scotland, New

Zealand, Spain, Ireland, Egypt, Malaysia, Turkey, Germany and Iran). Each of these countries has a different quality assurance and educational standards.

For example, in Chapter 3 (section 3.7) we learn, through the two key useful models of Harman (1998) and Kis (2005), that an analysis of a quality assurance system in a country requires focusing on certain dimensions to determine compatibility of systems. Questions like whether the accrediting authority is national (e.g. Oman and the UK), regional (e.g. the US) or an independent non-government authority (e.g. Australia), carries implications in terms of the standards applied, the process and methods followed, the impact of accreditation and the level of compliance required.

While Oman has begun its institutional quality audit and is in the process of accrediting its domestic HE sector, the challenge for Omani quality assurance is to control and cover this diversity and unevenness of transnational provision. The options are either to establish new systems and frameworks for TNHE or to enlarge the scope of the existing system to cover them.

Second, closely related to the issue of quality is **transparency** in terms of qualification recognition procedures. When students move from one HEI to the other, recognizing their qualification and assessing its value should not be an issue. The transparency issue is linked to the point above regarding control. Moreover, transparency suggests the need for the quality authority in Oman to work closely with other agencies in order to develop greater understanding of other systems.

Third, the startling growth of foreign partners brings with it a need to protect students and consumers of education from ‘degree mills’ and bogus providers. The risk can threaten institutions themselves if foreign institutions claim to be accredited but are not, and/or the accrediting agency turns out to be non-trustworthy (OECD, 2004).

Fourth, the 50 or so listed international academic institutions are likely to be offering different non-traditional patterns of provision. For example, programmes are offered through franchise, twinning, double degree and so on, as detailed in Chapter 4, section 4.5, and fall under various types of agreements. While the advantages are acknowledged, as mentioned earlier, the issue remains concerning the extent to which there are clear rationales behind the decision to seek transnational partners.

Other issues that can be pointed out are related to the programmes offered. A closer look at the offerings reveals duplication. Almost all of the PHEIs offer one or more of these subjects: Information Technology, Engineering and Business Studies/Management, Business Administration. Such commonality may carry implications for the market's ability to absorb such numbers in relation to the number of graduates seeking jobs in Oman, which could reflect negatively on employability rates. A question that may surface here is related to the true value of these partnerships and the extent to which they make a genuine contribution to the economy and community.

Obviously the scope of this research does not allow investigation of all these issues. Further studies are needed to cover, for example, the impact of TNHE on employability. However, this study is interested in seeking participants' perceptions regarding relationships with partners, efficacy of partnerships and rationales behind the decision to seek TN activities.

All in all, the above issues put pressure on the national system of quality assurance and recognition of qualifications. Externally, it points to the need for robust international frameworks for accreditation and quality assurance across borders.

2.6 Challenges Identified in the Area of Academic Affiliation

This section will focus on analysing some of the comments and feedback given to HEIs by the OAAA. According to the OAAA, *Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance* are investigated as part of the first standard: **Governance and Management**. As will be explained in the following section, the official onsite audit visits conducted by OAAA cover specific standards. The visits are usually followed by a report commenting on the standards and sent to HEIs. These comments (below) are lifted from some actual published quality audit reports that are available and accessible through OAAA website[2]. Comments come from audit reports published prior to the stage of data collection, which was carried on in 2013.

[2] http://www.oaaa.gov.om/

For the sake of focusing on the issues and on OAAA comments, whenever names of institutions are mentioned in the portfolio they will be removed in this section and replaced by letters X and Y.

The **first** issue is related to the quality of the students. Students who enrol in PHEIs are usually not ready for public/state HEI admission. They are the students whose grades do not qualify them for free public HE or scholarships abroad. A tension therefore arises because partners (and their programmes) are expected to be accredited and therefore come with high standards in terms of what they expect of students. The mismatch between the students' level and the standards the institutions are expected to meet could be a major challenge.

This can be seen in an OAAA Audit Report, which found that, in relation to an existing approved arrangement, the institutional agreement had changed in a significant way. Through interviews with staff, it was found that '*these modifications arose from the inability of students to manage the initial (X University) curriculum, particularly the standard of English required'*.

In this case, the partner chose to address the issue by *'providing a different curriculum, with different, and importantly, lower English entry requirements. A greater level of Arabic instead of English is used in the delivery of some subjects and assessable work'*.

The report continues by stating that

'The new agreement represents a shift in responsibility for standards to the College and in this agreement the (Partner) indicates that the affiliate may exercise the right to review the final examination questions and other assessment methods, and "check the marking process". The implication of this change is significant for the (PHE) as the College must therefore have systems and processes in place to assure the academic standards of the programs. Furthermore, the Panel was told that the (Partner) had moved to a more advisory role on academic matters rather than taking significant accountability for the academic quality assurance of the programs'.

This suggests that partners may not be real contributors at certain critical levels and prefer to take on less risky responsibilities, shifting other responsibilities to the local PHEI. In addition, '*During interviews, the Panel heard that there were concerns that the College did not receive the same kind of support from the (X University) as from the other affiliate institutions'*.

While such comments raise questions about the terms and conditions of agreements, they also raise other important questions about the level of commitment, integrity and motives of the partner entering such agreements. Further concerns are related to the ability and readiness of the PHE to assume such responsibilities in the absence of an experienced partner. This issue suggests the question: are partners assuring quality in reality?

A **second** issue is related to transparency, as seen in the following Recommendation to an HEI that it '*ensure mechanisms are in place to keep students and other stakeholders informed about relevant program standards and articulation agreements'*. Available information on the programmes or partnership arrangements may be vague or they might change, leaving room for misunderstanding and ambiguity. When information is not communicated effectively and clearly, it is likely that such scenarios would result in sending the wrong impression of the scope of the relationship between the PHE and the foreign partner. Parents and students might think that the partner, for example, is responsible for academic quality or confers qualifications, when actually the partner's role is limited to consultancy. The same issue is seen in the case of an HEI which decided, after enrolling students, to change the medium of instruction from English to Arabic without informing students ahead of time. This occurrence raises the question of how clear the community is about the scope of partnerships, and the possibility of misleading messages being sent when the acquisition of a foreign partner is announced.

A **third** issue is related to the extent to which plans are in place to address the risk of changing or terminating the agreement with the foreign partner. Partnerships might end for any reason and therefore, possession of a mechanism to ensure succession, consistency and sustainability is a major requirement. In one case, based on the available evidence on the partnership, the partner was positively perceived by the audit panel who stated, '*This affiliation has provided a strong starting point for (PHEI), during its establishment phase, with respect to both academic and administrative management. It has also provided a good foundation for quality assurance, exemplified by specific reviews relating to library provision and finance'*. In fact, this organization received a Commendation on its successful affiliation. However, at a later stage the agreement changed, altering the nature of the affiliation and the responsibilities of both parties. In the Audit Report on this PHEI, it was recommended that the PHEI '*urgently develop a comprehensive management plan which considers all strategic and operational risks associated with this transition*'.

This case suggests that PHEIs might rely heavily on the partner without maintaining conscious targets to develop capacity and might, therefore, remain vulnerable to risks associated with sustainability. The case also raises concerns about the extent to which imported practices are being indigenized and incorporated in the local system.

A **fourth** key issue is related to transferral of good practice to the local Omani HE context. This is linked to the issue of indigenization when partners are over-protective of their own programmes and do not include the local PHEIs in their operation. This scenario is more evident in (but not limited to) franchised arrangements whereby the academic part is taken care of by the foreign partner and the responsibility of the local PHEI might be limited to providing administrative support. Depending on the scope of the agreement, partners might ensure the quality of their own provision by controlling design, delivery and assessment of their programmes. However, this does not mean that they share practices with the local Omani institutions. For example, in one case, where a programme was developed off-site and delivered by the Omani HEI, the same situation could be seen not only in terms of the local HEIs but also in terms of their context. It was recommended that the PHEI *'needs to ensure that adequate quality assurance mechanisms are in place and that there is appropriate local input'*.

Having a transnational partner does not necessarily mean that (good) practice is actually transferred, especially if the partner is not willing to share practices. This observation points to a key question: whose interest is actually being served here?

Similar observations are seen in other reports, such as the following *Recommendation* received by a PHEI:

'*It was clear to the Panel that there is a great deal of good practice in the College for monitoring and evaluating teaching quality but that at present not all programmes are subject to an inclusive and coherent approach that provides for continuous quality improvement. Aside from the (X University) and (Y University) programmes, the Panel considered the quality systems for monitoring teaching quality to be patchy. The Panel considers that the College would benefit from developing a formal mechanism whereby the good practice that exists is effectively shared and used to help ensure robust systems for monitoring teaching quality on all programmes'*.

Another question worth considering is the extent to which local HEIs are demonstrating accountability, in terms of effort put into managing such partners and creating learning opportunities in a consistent and strategic way, for the sake of transferring practice.

A **fifth** issue is related to contextualization, which is the extent to which the content is relevant to the local context. Contextualization of the curriculum receives attention from the Omani accrediting authority. This attention is reflected in another case in which a PHEI received the following recommendation: '*The Oman Academic Accreditation Authority recommends that the (X PHEI) develop and implement a consistent approach to the contextualization and localization of its curriculum as well as a mechanism to evaluate the effectiveness of its approach'*. One reason for this is the need to preserve and maintain cultural identity while moving towards a globalized world. This issue highlights that imported programmes that are developed elsewhere to serve certain purposes might not be relevant to the local context. What's more, this challenge poses a threat in terms of relevance of graduate skills to the local market and might increase challenges currently faced in Omanization and employability of graduates.

A **sixth** issue is connected to the points above and can be seen as relevant to capacity building. In this case, the PHEI has an arrangement with a recognized university to provide academic guidance, curriculum and access to journals. Moreover, X University '*has conducted quality reviews every two years, from the opening of the College*' (almost a decade of partnership). The report goes on, '*A strong contingent of (X University) staff members has visited (PHEI) over the last few years; for example 16 staff members visited in 2005-2006*'. Consequently, the audit report states that '*the (X University) plays an important role in the College's quality assurance systems as well as College leadership through* ***seconded management and academic staff****. Based on the evidence found by the Panel during the audit visit, the affiliate relationship is working well'*.

In fact, this PHEI received a commendation for the '*success of its affiliate relationship with (X) University in providing educational opportunities for students and producing graduates to meet ... needs in Oman*.'. Yet, this same PHEI received the following recommendations:

- Consider adding external representatives from stakeholder groups … to its study boards and/or its curriculum committees to inform curriculum development and improve industry linkages

- Revise its strategic planning process to reflect current strategic intent and adopt a more inclusive planning process which leads to appropriate operational plans
- Review its policy development and management systems to optimize consistency between campuses and communicate the changes to all stakeholders.

The above recommendations seem to concern things that should have already been in place. Therefore, it is not unusual for a PHEI with a number of years of successful partnership to continue to receive recommendations related to its basic operation in terms of policy setting, management systems or any activity related to the operation of a HEI. While acknowledging the concept of Quality Improvement, as will be explored in Chapter 3, and the fact that the educational process is dynamic and needs to be continuously improved, considering the length of the relationship and activities involved in this case, one could not help but ask what assurance of quality really means here.

A **seventh** issue is related to clarity of roles and responsibilities. While this concern is reflected in most of the issues mentioned above, it still needs to be mentioned separately. For example,

'*The Panel acknowledges the nature of the affiliation with (X University) and the existence of a valid agreement and annual site visit reports. However, the Panel observed that there is no shared understanding between (X University) and the College on some key details of the agreement, both in terms of the type and the depth of the affiliates' responsibilities*'.

There could be a number of factors behind this Recommendation. To begin with, it could be due to miscommunication or lack of communication between the two parties when it comes to roles and responsibilities. This observation indicates the need to obtain access to agreements to get an idea of how detailed the documents addressing affiliations and partnerships are. There is also a possible gap in terms of cultural differences. For example, a foreign partner might come from a context where concepts such as 'self reflection' 'critical thinking' and 'autonomy' are dominant. However, the expectation in the local context might be that the partner would be proactive in identifying gaps and issues in practice. Such variation could create a tension and give rise to conflicts in terms of who should do what. This observation has relevance to the third issue too. It can be further seen in another report, in which the OAAA is trying to send the message that the local HEI is accountable and equally responsible for its provision:

'Overall, there was a sense that the College needs to develop and embed a culture of mature

self-review across some operational areas. To some degree this is understandable given (PHEI) history, current stage of evolution and reliance on overseas HEIs to provide feedback data and confirm standards. The College's confidence to engage with rigorous self-initiated review'.

An **eighth** concern is related to the accreditation and monitoring of the foreign partner's operation. As will be seen in Chapter 4, cross-border provision is taken seriously in certain countries for a number of reasons, one of which is that it contributes considerably to the national economy of the exporting country. Other reasons are related to accountability. This can be seen in the UK, Australia and the US. Therefore, the operation of universities abroad is subject to auditing and is supported by codes and standards that the providers are required to meet. This is especially true in the case of the UK and Australia, which have held their providers responsible for the students and quality of their provision, whether students are onshore (in the local campus) or offshore (in another country). Regardless of the effectiveness of these measures, subjecting providers in the exporting countries to audits and then publishing information on their operation abroad may help to increase the reliability and credibility of these providers, not to mention the seriousness with which they consider their reputation and operation.

However, this may not be true of other providers. For example, in one case the auditing panel found out that the partner accrediting authority '*had not concerned itself in any particular way with (PHEI). As such, it was appropriate that the Panel spent some time exploring this relationship*'. So while the partner is accredited in their home country, which of course confers an advantage over non-accredited partners, accreditation itself may vary in scope and may not necessarily take into consideration their operation abroad or their other partners. In this case, the responsibility for monitoring the relationship falls on the local Omani authorities. Such an observation might suggest the importance of subjecting partners to some sort of standards that they must meet, thus including them in the loop of accreditation. It may also suggest limiting partners to countries that fall under some degree of quality control in regard to monitoring arrangements.

The point made by O'Rourke and Al Balushi (2010) that the reality may not meet expectations in all cases is evident from the above analysis of Quality Audit Reports from the OAAA/OAC. In their article *Managing Quality from a Distance: A Case Study of Collaboration Between Oman and New Zealand*, O'Rourke and Al Balushi (2010) reflect on an episode that took place

in 2006. At that time, New Zealand signed an agreement with the Ministry of Higher Education to provide ready-designed packages of college degrees for delivery in English in Oman. The pre-existing Bachelors in Information Technology, Tourism, Art and Design, Communication Studies had been accredited in New Zealand and conformed to the exporter's quality assurance standards. Yet, the experience was less than successful for many reasons, such as the number of students who were not prepared to study in English at college level, lack of academic support, lack of knowledge of the Omani context in term of quality regulation and frameworks, lack of cultural sensitivity in material that did not conform to Omani culture, and lack of professional development plans to ensure suitability of academic staff.

Many of these problems can be attributed to the attempt to, as the authors say, manage from a distance. In fact, Zigarus and McBurnie (2015, p. 138) admit that distance can cause negligence. They believe that TNHE is inherently more prone than domestic provision to disconnection and negligence due to geographical and operational distance from the 'centre' of the awarding institution. The authors also point out that, in cases where fees are charged, there is the potential for academic standards to be compromised, in particular because of friction between academic and commercial priorities. This is especially so in view of the fact that Omani HEIs pay a considerable amount of money to support their transnational activities. For example, it is reported that in return for the foreign partner's services, local Omani institutions pay fees as per their agreements. The fee could be in the form of fixed periodic amounts, as a percentage of profit, or on a per capita enrollment basis. Fees for the partner oversight services could be substantial, with partners sometimes receiving amounts in excess of $ 200,000 per year (Al Barawani et al., 2011).

When it comes to transnational activity, it can be argued that, traditionally, TNHE is visible in the form of curriculum being imported to Oman. An example would be the illustration introduced earlier in Figure 4 and the experience in 2006 of partnership with New Zealand, reported above (O'Rourke and Al Balushi, 2010). TNHE also takes the form of importing human capacity due to the fact that Omanization in academic posts in higher education still has a long way to go. Apart from importation of educational measures and workers, TNHE was experienced in the form of students, supported by government scholarships, physically moving and travelling abroad. The Omani government has policies and scholarships that encourage students, faculty and employees working in other sectors to travel abroad for higher education, provided that they are Omani nationals. However, Omani faculty and student mobility is not covered in this research, although it is perhaps an area for future research.

It is interesting to note that according to GATS, the worldwide agreement managed by the World Trade Organization (WTO), international supply of educational services can be classified into four modes: Mode 1: Cross-border supply such as virtual education and ICT delivery. Mode 2: Consumption abroad, as by students studying abroad. Mode 3: Commercial presence that takes the form of foreign-owned campuses and institutions, involving foreign investment and franchised programmes. Mode 4: presence of foreign human capacity in the form of lecturers, researchers or professors working abroad. Knight (2006b) explains that Mode 1 represents service movement, in this case education, in its virtual form, although virtual education in the form of online education is not common in Oman due to the restrictions placed on it. However, Mode 2, which is about consumer movement, is clearly known in the form of students travelling to other countries to study. In fact, it is the oldest known form, since the government sponsored students to travel in 1970, when there were no education facilities available in the country. Mode 3 is about provider and investment movement, and is the latest form known in Oman, as represented in transnational partnership, which is the main focus of this research. Mode 4 is about movement of human capital, which is the form primarily known in Oman.

While the above-mentioned modes provide a framework that helps us understand the supply of education, education remains a service that may not be fully categorized within such a trade framework. This view is highlighted by Knight (2011, p. 21), who asserts that the four listed modes '*do not capture or reflect the fullness of cross-border education and as such, they do not capture or reflect the fullness of cross-border education activity-development cooperation, academic partnerships, as well as commercial trade*'. For example, while Mode 3 focuses on provider and investment movement, its scope in Oman does not necessarily mean that there are branch campuses. Unlike neighbouring countries such as Qatar and the UAE, which offer incentives and encourage foreign investment and branch campuses, Oman's focus is on developing local HEIs. In this sense, a foreign provider does not exist in isolation or as a stand-alone supplier. Rather, it exists mainly through approaches and modes of partnership with the local HE providers.

Up to the main stage of data collection in this study (Spring 2013), which involved collecting data at organizational level, the information available on the modes of affiliation in Oman was limited. The word 'affiliation' seems to refer to various types of partnership. In particular, reference to the term seems to include at least two forms: *franchise* and *validation*, as stated

by Al Barawani, Ameen and Chapman (2011, p. 135): '*Within Oman international affiliation system, there was room for some extent of variation. Most affiliation developed as franchise agreements, others as validation agreements'.*

However, an attempt was made by Al Barawani, Ameen and Chapman (2011) to categorize TNHE (cross-border education) in Oman. In their qualitative research with Deans of four colleges, the following four approaches/modes of affiliation have been captured as a snapshot of the existing arrangements. In this research, the foreign partner is referred to as an affiliate whereas the local HEI is referred to as a College:

1. Affiliate A approves all the modules of College A. While affiliate A is interested in comparability of outcomes, there is no interference with the teaching practice in the College.

2. Affiliate B helps College B develop courses unique to Oman, which are not necessarily developed for use at the affiliate's own campus. Courses are not controlled or run by the affiliate. Yet, the affiliate validates courses as equivalent to their own and validates students' performance in their courses.

3. Affiliate C: Affiliate C has worked for a while with College B and as a result, College B has developed its capacity to the extent that the accrediting organization of the affiliates agrees to certify the courses offered in College C. Students in both campuses sit exams on the same day and at the same time. Exams are double-marked locally and a sample is sent to the affiliate for verification and independent marking.

4. Affiliate D: College D decides on the courses that it wants to offer and then finds an affiliate who offers the same. College D is visited annually by teams from the affiliate to talk to students and determine the comparability of outcomes.

The above approaches vary considerably in terms of scope and responsibilities, which implies variation in the benefits gained from affiliation. For example, the first approach seems to focus on outcomes; however, it seems to place less emphasis on the input and the process leading to the outcome. Moreover, it can be argued that the scope of comparability is unrealistic considering that teaching is a major part of the process that produces a certain outcome, not to

mention the surrounding academic support, yet this approach ignores the way teaching is carried out.

The second approach seems more context-sensitive, since programmes are developed to suit the local context. However, the very factor that seems to confer an advantage could also act as an obstacle considering that, again, the affiliate does not interfere with teaching methods that may be traditional and out-of-date. This poses questions regarding the affiliate's knowledge of the effectiveness of the internal systems that control the quality of the process. Yet, the affiliates still validate the courses and treat them as equivalent in standards to theirs, hence, raising concerns about this model of affiliation.

The third approach does not say much about the input and the process; rather, the focus seems to be on the output in the form of test grades. The fourth approach, unlike the others listed above, tries to find a match and seems to put some emphasis on the process and the outcome. However, it is not clear what would make a certain organization decide to adopt one approach rather than another. Moreover, additional information is needed about the approaches that are considered favourable and why they are so considered. Furthermore, while the above snapshots do not capture the full picture of affiliation operation in Oman, it would be worth investigating other possible approaches. Most importantly, the lack of a framework within which a better understanding of these approaches might be achieved makes it necessary to try to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

2.7 How Oman is Assuring the Quality of HE Provision

In June 2001, the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) was established by Royal Decree (No. 74/2001) to send a strong message to the sector about the importance of quality. As a government funded agency, the OAC was entrusted with accrediting institutions, both for-profit and not-for-profit, as well as recognizing and accrediting programmes, both local and foreign. It was also supposed to provide information, reviews and quality improvement procedures. The Accreditation Board was selected by the Council of Higher Education and was usually composed of ten members from high levels of government and private professions, with appropriate academic and professional expertise, representing the academic and industrial fields. Between 2001 and 2004 it prepared policies and standards with international assistance and published the Requirements for Oman's System of Quality Assurance (ROSQA) for HEIs to follow before they apply for accreditation. This document contained information related to

the classification of the HEI and set standards for academic rewards through the *National Qualification Framework*, besides the procedures for approval and accreditation.

In 2010, the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) was established by Royal Decree No. 54/2010 to replace the Oman Accreditation Council. It was given the greater degree of independence and autonomy needed to deal with the HE sector. Its responsibilities continue to include conducting Quality Audits of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the Sultanate of Oman, along with the periodic accreditation of local academic programmes and recognition of foreign ones.

As illustrated in Figure 6, institutional accreditation consists of two stages:

Stage 1: Quality audit, which is a formative assessment that takes into consideration the unique purpose of each institution and therefore does not aim at comparing institutions against each other. The starting point is the institution's own mission and vision, in accordance with which it is judged how well certain areas (nine previously defined by OAAA) are attended to. This stage requires a self-study resulting in a *Quality Audit Portfolio* to be submitted to the OAAA and a visit from an external audit panel convened by the OAAA for verification purposes. The above process is followed by a public *Quality Audit Report* which contains results. A judgement is not in the form of a grade. Rather it is reported with relevance to **nine** standards and comprises *Statements of Commendation, Affirmations and Recommendations,* each accompanied with an explanatory paragraph.

The nine standards are:

1. Governance and Management
2. Student Learning by Coursework Programmes
3. Student Learning by Research Programmes
4. Staff Research and Consultancy
5. Industry and Community Engagement
6. Academic Support Services
7. Students and Student Support Services
8. Staff and Staff Support Services
9. General Support Services and Facilities

Stage 2: Standards Assessment is conducted four years after Stage 1. It is summative in nature. It measures the HEI's performance externally against the same set of standards used in Stage 1. Like the first stage, it includes an internal process of self-assessment against the standards followed by an assessment application made to the OAAA. Then a panel visits the institution to conduct the external assessment, which is followed by a *Standard Assessment Report*. If the national standards are met, then the institution is fully accredited, as the illustration below shows, (OAAA, 2011).

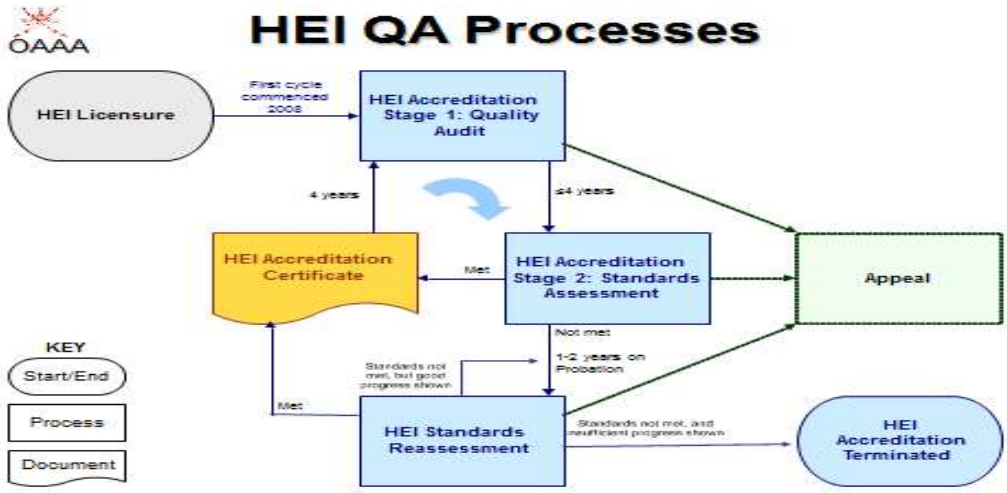

Figure 6: HEI QA Process. Source; OAAA (2011)

It is worth mentioning that, at the time of writing up this thesis, almost all the institutions have gone through only the first stage and received their review reports (reports are available on the OAAA website – www.oac.gov.om). HEIs are currently in the process of being notified of the time when the OAAA will visit them for Stage 2, which results in accreditation.

An outcome of the OAAA *Institutional Audit* is a publicly published report made available on the OAAA website. Publishing the report serves many purposes. First, making reports available reflects many of the OAAA values such as *Integrity, Professionalism and Transparency*. Moreover, according to the website, the OAAA mission is to '*provide reliable information to the public and other stakeholders on the quality of higher education in Oman*'. Second, publishing these reports helps to hold HEIs accountable for their operation and gives the community and stakeholders the opportunity to choose and decide on options related to HEIs. Third, the feedback contained in such reports is expected to help HEIs understand their strengths (Commendations) and keep working on areas that need improvement (Affirmation),

while providing the opportunity to make these improvements (Recommendations). Finally, in terms of transnational activity, international academic HEIs may consider these reports as the main sources of reliable, independently available information which can help them make decisions when approached by potential Omani HEIs.

It can be argued that this model (self-study, audit visit and review report) is actually borrowed because it is based on different international examples such as that of the UK's Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA).

2.8 Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has 'set the scene' in terms of the issues that are at the centre of this thesis. These derive from the different rationales for TNHE education, the policy and regulatory framework within which it exists, its different modes, and the reality of its implementation alongside the challenges associated with the national development imperative that informs higher education in Oman at present, and the perennial challenges associated with quality.

As will be seen, literature in the area of TNHE warns that rationales for seeking TNHE differ not only between importers and exporters but also from organization to organization. As much as transnational partnership in Oman is driven by national policy as seen earlier, it is not clear how such policy has affected HEIs in practice. This implies the need to question how the rationales and intentions of policy-makers translate into practice, and how the two dimensions of policy, formulation and implementation, interact and with what effects, including perhaps unintended consequences.

Similarly, it can be argued that other areas in need of investigation are related to how people experience the phenomenon of TNHE, particularly academic staff as both key stakeholders and agents, and perhaps specifically in relation to questions of quality.

The limited research in Oman on the subject to date only scratches the surface of the phenomenon in terms of regulation and barely touches on the approaches seen above, let alone on the experience of academic staff in Omani institutions involved in TNHE collaborations.

Thus there is a need to question the efficacy of the project and explore doubts that knowledge and systems imported to the Arab Gulf, Oman included, are simply purchased, may be outdated and do not necessarily encourage self-development and self-improvement (Donn and Al Manthari, 2010).

In light of the above, the overarching purpose of this research is to investigate the rationales, approaches, perspectives and challenges associated with transnational partnership in the sphere of higher education. The research questions arising from this purpose and addressed in this study are:

1. What are the rationales behind transnational partnerships in higher education (at national and organizational level)?
2. What are the approaches experienced in each case institution? How do these vary and why?
3. How do academic staff informants in these institutions perceive and experience transnational partnerships and their efficacy?
4. How do they see transnational partnerships as a contribution to quality?
5. What are the implications of the current level of dependence on transnational partnerships on quality provision and on the educational development of the higher education sector in Oman, and what issues does the case raise regarding the practice of policy borrowing?

The following chapters attempt to address the key conceptual areas in this study, namely *quality in higher education* and *Transnational Higher Education*, through a critical review of a selection of the relevant literature.

Chapter 3: Quality in Higher Education

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the first of two that address key concepts and related theories by means of a critical review of a selection of the relevant literature, the question of quality in higher

education is explored. Section 3.2 focuses on tracking the evolution of the concept of quality and its multiple meanings. This is followed by section 3.3, which covers borrowing of the different forms of the concept of quality according to educators, followed by section 3.4, in which the resulting challenges of quality assurance in higher education will be discussed. The various ways of understanding quality assurance in higher education will be unpacked in section 3.5 External quality assurance will be covered in section 3.6 whereas the key interrelated dimensions involved in driving quality and the different ways of evaluating quality assurance will be critiqued in section 3.7. Concluding remarks on this chapter are presented in section 3.8.

Inevitably, this requires consideration of quality assurance, quality control and quality improvement, though none of these is the primary focus of this thesis. Rather, they comprise part of the context within which transnational higher education has developed in Oman, and part of the complex web within which transnational higher education in the country is managed, delivered and perceived by the various stakeholder groups that have an interest in it. Accordingly, clarifying the core concept of Quality in Higher Education and identifying an appropriate theoretical standpoint to adopt in this thesis will be critical factors.

At the outset of this chapter, it is acknowledged that quality is a contested, complex concept that is hard to define (Green, 1994; Pfeffer and Coote, 1991). In addition, it is recognized that as the term is used in policy and practice in higher education, it inevitably has significance in the spheres of *intention*, *execution* and *outcomes*. Thus any working definition of the term must take these spheres into account and, in addition, must recognize not only the complex human dynamic that is involved in education, with its multiple stakeholders, but also the interaction of short, medium and (very) long timescales associated with any educational experience. According to writers such as Fuller (1987) and Adams (1993), quality in education carries (or should carry) a transformative aspect for learners that impacts on their thinking, personality and futures. It is generally recognized that, in education as in other spheres of life, quality as a concept is often associated with subjective experience.

Further, it is a concept that has only been systematically explored and developed in spheres such as education over a relatively short period. It is also recognized that both in practice (and policy) and in the literature and discourse, prevailing global notions of quality are those that have developed over time in the Western World, shaped by many political, social and economic factors.

To translate these preliminary observations into implications for this thesis:

1. Quality means different things to different stakeholders.
2. The resultant complexity increases when education is 'exported' from the 'developed world' to 'developing countries' through transnational education.
3. International stakeholders who arrive with the international affiliations that are encouraged/required in higher education in Oman have their own interpretations of quality.

3.2 The Development of Prevailing Notions of Quality

This section will focus on the development of the notion of quality and the circumstances that gave way to its existence.

To begin with, quality as a well-developed concept is a long-standing one, according to Sallis (2002). There is an extensive literature on its 'generic, normative' associations, though much of this is in the English language and draws heavily on European and English-language based experience and history.

As an English language term applied to organized human activity, the term quality may have its roots in the (medieval) craftsmanship era (around the 14th/15th centuries). Then, quality was understood in relation to skilled workers, operating as members of *Guilds*, and producing handmade craft with a certain level of quality as judged by 'master' craftsmen in the same field. Checking quality at that time was thus the responsibility of individuals, who would use 'benchmarks', at first literally, to help them do so.

Such roots of the term created the basis for further development of the concept and related practices during the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century and the subsequent emergence of mass production. This required 100% inspection and tests to control the quality of products: hence the appearance of formal systems of ***Quality Control*** (Deming, 1986; Shewart, 1931). By the mid years of the 20th century, systems of ***Quality Assurance*** (Evans, 1999) had emerged as evolving mass production techniques meant that individuals were no longer responsible for making whole products and self-checking quality. Instead, the manufacturing process was broken down into small repetitive tasks combined with a 'scientific' approach to management, giving rise to 'scientific' measurement of quality.

However, between around 1950 and 1970 the focus shifted from *products* to *workers* and the understanding of quality was informed by concepts such as empowerment, leadership, and customer focus, combined in the concept and practice of ***Total Quality Management*** (TQM) (Juran, 1964; Crosby, 1979). Between 1970 and 1990, the increasingly high level of attention given to quality gave rise to the ***Standards and Awards*** era. Setting standards became important and organizations that demonstrated that they could meet 'objective' sector-wide standards were rewarded. This shift also, to a significant extent, resulted from the extension of the ***Quality Imperative*** beyond manufacturing to *services*, including education.

As above, therefore, the key concepts of quality: Quality Control, Quality Assurance and Total Quality Management appeared at different times and carried different meanings. Dale and Plunkett (1980) help us to understand the difference between them, as they emerged in the manufacturing sector.

Quality Control is an after-the-event process of detecting and eliminating final products that are not up to standard. Once the production process is complete, there has to be inspection and testing to assess the quality products. However, waiting until a product has been produced inevitably involves waste and reworking.

Quality Assurance is a before- and during–the-event process to prevent faults arising in the first place. Therefore, zero defects, fault-free products and getting things right first time, every time is the target (Crosby, 1979). The process also includes external accreditation and audit of quality systems.

Total Quality Management differs in the sense that it is about *continuous* improvement. It is more service oriented and aims to provide the 'customers' with what they want, in the way and at the time that they want it. Companies design products that not only 'delight' customers and meet their expectations, but even exceed these.

Yet, the three dominant terms (*Quality Control*, *Quality Assurance*, *Total Quality Management*) are not the only ways to conceptualize quality. In the wider literature, there are other concepts such as ***Quality Assessment*** and ***Quality Enhancement***. ***Quality Assessment*** focuses on problems, control, external accountability, measurements and regulations. The emphasis is on compliance and summative judgments; hence, negative sanction is used to

ensure compliance with regulations and frameworks. ***Quality Enhancement*** is about utilizing formative feedback processes to introduce change. Frameworks and regulations place organizational learning at the centre and therefore engage staff in order to bring improvements (D'Andrea and Gosling, 2005).

Despite Quality Assurance and Quality Improvement emerging as notions after the Second World War, Sallis (2002) believes that only in the 1980s did they became fairly widely used in the United States and the United Kingdom. During that decade, a flourishing Japanese manufacturing industry triggered enquiries as to why the Japanese world market share kept increasing when, only a few decades earlier, Japan's economy had been devastated by the Second World War.

One explanation for this success is that the 'quality movement' first achieved success and fame in the Far East. In the late 1940s the Japanese actually showed interest in quality as a means of recovering from the damage they had suffered after the Second World War. Their approach to quality was mainly statistical, involving the use of Statistical Process Control (SPC) (Deming, 1986; Shewart, 1931) to eliminate delay and waste through a PDCA Cycle: Plan, Do, Check and Act. This aligns with Deming's stress on customers' wants and needs.

The multiplicity of ways of modulating the term 'quality' (as seen above), and indeed the multiple definitions of the term itself, highlight the complexity of the concept. This complexity is further compounded by the presence, in any context, of multiple stakeholders with different perceptions and expectations, and by the nature of the activity, product or service. For instance, the meaning attached to quality varies between a manufacturing company and a service company. While a manufacturing company might focus on conformance to requirements and 'zero defects', a service company may focus on customer satisfaction. Yet, in some sectors such as information products and software, both modes of definition have to be maintained. For example, while it is important to ensure the functioning and reliability of a software package (as error free), it is equally important to provide technical support and ensure that customer needs are met.

So, despite the absence of a clear definition and notwithstanding the existence of various paradigms of quality and several sets of theory in the quality arena, as Chua (2002, p. 1) puts it, '*Most of the quality models that are commonly practiced in the business world have been adapted and used in the education sector'*. The literature points out that borrowing of industrial

concepts and principles by the education sector was not new. For example, some of the popular concepts currently used in education such as promoting teamwork, participatory management, encouraging learning environments, demonstrating leadership and commitment, and encouraging quality circles are traced back to quality experts namely, Deming, Juran and Crosby.

The following sections will be dealing with quality, however, in the context of education and higher education both nationally and globally.

3.3 Quality in Education

Debates about the status of quality in education include the assertion that interest in quality in education did not exist formally before the 1980s. However, Rosa and Amaral (2007) believe that the concept of quality dates back to the medieval European universities, and Van Vaught and Westerheijden (1994) make reference to two models of quality assessment in the 13th century, suggesting that some aspects of these (e.g. the dimension of peer review) are still relevant to quality management in higher education today. As Vroeijenstijn (1995) asserts, '*The concept of quality is not new: it has always been part of the academic tradition. It is the outside world that now emphasizes the need for attention to quality ... It is the relationship between higher education and society which has changed*'.

Having said that, more general transferral of concepts and approaches from industry and the commercial, for-profit sector to the educational field was not unproblematic, due to the existence of strong principles in the higher education context, such as academic freedom and professional autonomy (Colling and Harvey, 1995). Sceptics questioned how an industry that dealt with tangible products and targeted profit could be compared to the educational field, which is grounded on the human element and targeted on intangible results. Seeing students as 'products' meant that when they graduated, '*they should meet a certain guaranteed standard, which is impossible as the human nature is complex and involves different emotions and experiences'* (Gary, 1992).

Without necessarily endorsing the whole of this assertion, it can undoubtedly be helpful to view education as a *service*, and this is how the interest in Total Quality Management (TQM) linked to quality assurance and quality enhancement came in the 1990s to have significance for the education sector. Indeed, some, like Scott (1996), believe that higher education came to be just like any other service.

3.4 Challenges of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

In 1973, in *Problems in Transition from Elite to Mass Higher Education*, Trow noted that traditionally ***Elite Higher Education*** focused on shaping the minds of a ruling class (about 5% of the age group) and preparing them for elite roles. ***Mass Higher Education*** started to emerge in the UK and elsewhere after World War II and was characterized by increased enrolment of students with a focus on transmission of skills and preparation for broader roles. Finally, ***Universal Higher Education*** witnessed enrolment of more than 50% of the age group, driven by social and technological changes.

With the increasing pressure of massification, diversification and reduction in funds, a different kind of conversation about higher education unfolded, whether in terms of purpose, structure or system. Altbach (2008) states that changes in context, especially massification, carry tensions as to whether education is a public good or a private good. This tension has relevance to the formerly perceived purpose of education as a public commodity, a principle that dominated thinking in developed countries during the postwar period, and developing countries during post-independent times.

The understanding was that governments, under a social democratic consensus and possessing a welfare state, should do everything for everyone. State control was believed to ensure equality of opportunity for all in terms of access to education. Education itself was accepted as having widespread benefits that in the long run would pay back the country through a productive workforce, self-improvement and social peace (Talk, 2004). There was no need to recover costs or investment in education from students or other stakeholders.

However, such attitudes changed in many countries that had relied on state-funded higher education, mainly because of the increasing difficulty of funding higher education from the public purse, a problem which in turn caused governments to look to private sector provision. This inevitably brought the 'market' into the higher education sector in a way not previously experienced in such countries.

While this research is not about privatization of higher education, it is relevant to consider, albeit briefly, its origins and characteristics, since in Oman, transnational partnership is a requirement the government places on courses provided by the private sector.

In the more 'normal' or conventional situation of state-provided higher education, the relationship between higher education and the government changed from a model of state control to a model of state supervision (Brennan and Shah, 2000). State supervision gave more autonomy to HEIs but at the same time imposed more responsibilities, accompanied by different forms of evaluation and systems of accountability, a model which Neave (1996) refers to as the 'evaluative state'. Massification has put an increasingly heavy financial burden on the welfare state model, so that in many countries it has been recognized that the cost of higher education must be shared between taxpayers and fee-paying students, who in return demand more information about the quality, processes and services provided by HEIs (Rosa and Amarel, 2007).

Traditional trust in higher education's abilities to assess itself decreased, while demands for accountability mechanisms increased. In the last two decades more ideas have been borrowed from the commercial, for-profit sector, such as efficiency, effectiveness and entrepreneurship, now commonly referred to in the literature as 'managerialism' or the 'new public management' (Meek, 2002; Reed, 2002). In the UK, for example, quality control mechanisms allowed the government to maintain overall strategic control while delegating responsibilities to an external agency (the Quality Assurance Agency [for Higher Education]) to oversee the HEIs' own efforts.

In the UK, as in other similar systems, before the 1990s universities had to explicitly demonstrate responsibility for quality and standards (Frackmann, 1991) while committing themselves to self-evaluation and development. In addition, they were required to have transparent and robust systems not only for managing and improving quality but also for meeting accountability requirements (Newton, 2007). Concepts such as 'fitness for purpose' and 'value for money' encouraged a focus on comparable measures.

In addition, higher education was required to contribute explicitly to national agendas. For example, in the UK the underpinning aims were to help improve economic performance and to address demographic and employment issues (Green, 1994), whereas in the US it was mainly to improve the economy (Sallis, 2002). As early as 1963, writers such as Kerr (p. xii) had recognized that '*The basic reality, for the university, is the widespread recognition that new knowledge is the most important factor in economic and social growth. We are just now perceiving that the university's invisible product, knowledge, may be the most powerful single element in our culture, affecting the rise and fall of professions and even social classes, of*

regions and even nations'. This implicitly emphasizes the importance of knowledge production as a key purpose of education through its contribution to the economy.

Generally speaking, the pattern outlined in the last few paragraphs was experienced globally. Governments in other countries had to address similar issues and began to demand improvements in education to meet technological and economic changes, which led to a growing state interest in higher education.

On the macro level, promoting free trade through the *General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)*, as will be explained in Chapter 4, increased the market-oriented delivery of HE. The emergence of a profit element in the context of private sector higher education has raised concerns about the impact of the GATS agreement on quality. Countries that sign this agreement are obliged to reduce barriers to trading in education services. Consequently, there is a risk of the proliferation of 'diploma mills' and multiplication of provision. Such concerns have led to greater government interest in quality (Robinson, 2015), as a consequence of which private providers are required to supply a recognized stamp of quality.

To add to the above, national and supra-national regional initiatives for reform have played a role in promoting quality. In Europe, though with implications for other parts of the world, the Bologna process (involving 45 countries) and the Lisbon strategy (covering 25 European Union member states) are two important influences. They have impacted on reforms at the European level since 1999, causing convergence of policies. They have also taken quality to another level. The *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education* that was proposed to the Ministers of the Bologna countries in Bergen (2005) paved the way for annual forums to discuss quality relevant matters at the European level, guided by a desire to share practices in the sphere of quality, on the understanding that it is a developmental tool for institutions, as expressed by Jensen, Chair of the Forum Organising Committee of the 1st European Forum for Quality Assurance in 2006. Similar initiatives appeared later on in other parts of the world, aimed at starting cross-national and international conversations on quality assurance in Higher Education (for example, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)). According to Jeliazkova and Westerheijden (2002), demands on institutional arrangements to offer quality assurance increased with the spread of internationalization, most notably through the Bologna process. Other factors that led to a further increase in interest in quality are:

- A growing need for harmonization and convergence (ENQA 2009b)
- Increase in international and transnational education
- The complexity of cross-border provision, which required comparability, transparency and international mutual acceptance of qualifications.

Therefore, increasing attention to the issue was seen at an international level with the launch of codes and guidelines such as the OECD *Guidelines for quality provision in cross-border higher education* (UNESCO 2005).

All in all, interest in quality assurance appears to be linked to massification, diversification, internationalization and cost, and to be inspired by the wish to prioritize external quality assessment approaches (Van Vaught and Westerheijden, 1994).

3.5 Understanding Quality Assurance in Higher Education

As already shown, the English-language literature addressing quality assurance in higher education reveals varied perspectives and models, reflecting a lack of consensus. As stated by Gibson (1986), '*Quality is notoriously elusive of prescription, and no easier to describe and discuss than deliver in practice'*. It is also believed to be value-laden with subjective associations (Dochy, Segers and Wijen, 1990; Pfeffer and Coote, 1991). Some see it as a creature of political fashion (Becher, 1989) and others describe it as 'slippery' (Harvey and Green, 1993).

That said, debate in the literature is usually associated with *standards* (Harvey and Green, 1993). Newton (2007), however, warns that the two concepts (quality and standards) are usually confused and that therefore a distinction should be drawn between the two. According to Newton, *quality* relates to processes such as the educational process experienced by students. *Standards* are the actual or intended achievements. Linking both concepts leads to the understanding that quality standards mean the contribution of educational processes to the quality of attainment of defined standards.

That said, it is important to recognize the types of standards: *Academic Standards* measure ability to meet specified levels of academic attainment. *Service Standards* are measures devised to assess the service provided. In both areas, *quality standards* are norms expressed in formal statements about expected practice. Harvey (2007) adds two more standards: *Standards of Competence* and *Organisational Standards*. The former refers to a specified level of ability

on a range of competences such as transferable academic skills. The latter refers to standards meant to measure effective management of organizational processes and practices.

Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge the context in which standards are used. The same intended or actual achievement could vary from one to another HEI depending on whether it is a 'minimum threshold' or an 'excellence' standard (Green, 1994). Using standards to measure quality in higher education is criticized on the grounds that HEIs might risk attaining standards that are far removed from excellence (Carroll, 2003).

As stated in Chapter 1, one of the core aims of the research at the centre of this thesis is to explore how TNHE affiliation is experienced. This implies exposure to and awareness of the standards of the (foreign) affiliate partners. In the key exporting countries, institutions are expected to maintain quality standards in their provision regardless of where students are located, while giving attention to the local partners' academic and service standards, in this case the Omani partners.

This reality underlines the importance of the 'people' dimension and the human dynamic involved in affiliation and partnership arrangements, compounding whatever human dynamic already exists in the case of each partner individually, and the human dynamic that is at the centre of education itself. As already stated, quality is said to mean different things to different people and its meaning depends on the circumstances in which the term is employed. Burrows and Harvey (1992) refer to the different stakeholders with their varying interests and involvements. Variations in stakeholders' perspectives is a challenge in itself and a particular concern of the school of thought that attaches quality to stakeholders (Harvey and Green, 1993; Vrooeijenstijn, 1992), which compounds the view that attaches quality to context (Braid, 1988; Fry, 1995).

In an attempt to move towards a clear position on the idea of quality in higher education and the way the concept is used in this study, it may be helpful to draw on Newton's (2006) notion that there are three ways to think about quality:

a) Quality as a mechanism
b) Quality as a stakeholder-relative concept
c) Quality as a concept.

Quality as a mechanism focuses on the processes of audit, accreditation, assessment and external examination (Harvey and Newton, 2005). A quality audit focuses on checking the quality of management systems and processes, accreditation is a process that results in decisions, a quality assessment judges internal or external performance against criteria, and finally, external examination checks competence, academic and service standards. Quality assurance checks the quality of processes and outcomes.

Second, *quality as a stakeholder-relative concept* draws attention away from uniformity in terms of defining and understanding quality. In this sense, it is not a unitary concept, rather, quality is best seen as multi-perspectival due to the involvement of different interest groups with different priorities in both debate about and realization of quality regimes. These groups include teaching and non-teaching staff, students, government and funding agencies, employers, accreditors, validators, auditors and assessors. For example, while teachers may be interested in the process of education, employers would probably be more interested in the outcome/outputs of higher education, and a government in impacts. Therefore, as suggested by Green (1994), the best that can be done is to take into consideration as many different, sometimes competing, views as possible when judging and assessing quality.

Finally, *quality* itself *as a concept* incorporates five different approaches: as exceptional or as excellence, as perfection or consistency, as fitness for purpose, as value for money and as transformation (see, for example, Harvey, 1993 and 1995; Harvey and Green, 1993; and Harvey, 2007). It is worth considering these five approaches as occupying the core of a possible theoretical standpoint in this thesis. For information, they are further explained in Annex A.

3.6 Overseeing and Promoting Quality in Higher Education

When it comes to agencies that have responsibility for external quality assurance, IIP-UNESCO (2011) differentiates between two approaches: standards-based vs. fitness-for-purpose. The standards-based understanding of quality sees quality as judged by reference to institutions' performance against pre-determined standards or expectations, establishing a threshold of quality.

Standards are set by a reference group – for example, government, as in the case of China – or by an independent agency that is entrusted with safeguarding quality, as in the UK. The set standards demand that institutions meet at least minimum requirements and the approach is

dominated by codes, rules, outcomes, competencies and regulation for the sake of ensuring compliance.

Common key areas of application of these standards in many countries would be: strategy and governance, faculty, students, academic infrastructure, academic programmes, academic and student support, and relationship with commerce and industry. For example, in the UK the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) operates independently of the government but its reports are fed back to government bodies. In Oman, the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA) has recently launched the Assessment Standards, which is a summative standards-based document to ensure that all HEIs in Oman meet national quality standards.

In a fitness-for-purpose system, a quality agency uses the goals and objectives set by the institution as a lens through which to analyse activities, looking for evidence to prove that objectives are achieved. Such an approach appears to be effective in contexts that are mature, as the aim becomes *improvement* rather than (simply) c*ompliance*. For example, the Australian Universities of Quality Assurance Agency (AUQA) does not impose external standards, as is the case in Oman and many other developing countries. Rather, due to the high level of autonomy granted to the higher education sector in Australia, the fitness-of- purpose approach is used as a primary starting point for audit.

In the case of the UK, where the sector is highly autonomous, there are Quality Codes. However, the sector is expected to exceed the standards set out in these, demonstrating *Quality Enhancement*.

Biggs (2013, pp. 8 and 9) provides a useful comparison of the main characteristics of QA and QE in Table 4.

	Quality Assurance	**Quality Enhancement**
Definition	A process by which HEIs account for the quality of their services	A process by which HEIs enhance the quality of their services
Key Purpose	Controlling quality	Improving quality

Key Driver	External: National QA agency (accreditation, assessment, audit)	Internal: Management groups/project groups of the HEI
Type of Pressure	Political pressure on HEIs for external adaptation to rules and regulations in relation to academic services	Collegial or managerial pressure on HEIs for internal integration of actors, processes and structures in relation to academic services
Key Methods	External evaluation, internal self-evaluation, peer reviews, site visits, audits	Staff competency development, creation of a learning organization, relational management, work with values, creation of a quality culture.

Table 4: Key Characteristics of QA and QE. Adapted from Biggs (2013)

The concepts of both Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement can represent internally and externally driven processes of either Control or Improvement (Biggs, 2013). When *internally* driven, Quality Enhancement for the purpose of improving quality can be seen in the focus on developing staff competence, on teaching, learning and assessment practices, and on students' learning outcomes. But when *externally* driven, Quality Enhancement will be demonstrated by an institution's engagement in benchmarking and accreditation activities.
In the case of Quality Assurance, when i*nternally* driven, an institution would be engaged in self-assessment and benchmarking. However, when *externally* driven, Quality Assurance will take the form of assessment, external review, externally formulated standards and criteria, accreditation and certification, on-site visits by external reviewers/agency staff, and review panels. The two concepts are believed to create two different types of environment. Coppiters' (2005) suggests that Quality Assurance encourages a culture of compliance. In terms of Quality Enhancement, however, the emphasis is – for example – on creating better learning environments and a culture of innovation.

The distinction provided here suggests a possible tension when quality is placed in the context of transnational higher education and institutional affiliation. Considering that developing countries such as Oman import education from developed countries such as the UK, a question that is bound to surface is: what exactly do partners from (for example) the UK, who lean towards a Quality Enhancement focus, do when their local Omani partners operate in a context that emphasizes standards and Quality Assurance?

3.7 Accountability, Improvement, and Driving Quality Assurance at the National Level

Quality assurance rationales and procedures in general seem to revolve around two key purposes: accountability and improvement.

Trow (1996, p. 2) defines accountability as *'the obligation to report to others, to explain, to justify, to answer questions about how resources have been used, and to what effect … The fundamental questions with respect to accountability are: who is to be held accountable, for what, to whom, through what means, and with what consequences'.* Accountability, therefore, is linked to some sort of judgement in terms of satisfaction, degree of soundness or fitness (Middlehurst and Woodhouse, 1995).

Accountability serves the purpose of providing an account of what one is doing, whether in terms of service, product or processes. This information needs to be provided to other parties that have either an interest or the right to know about this, such as government authorities, stakeholders or the public. Quality assurance for accountability purposes is summative, so, besides being related to judgements, the approach to it is explicit in the form of published statements and outcomes, especially in countries where the higher education sector has a degree of autonomy (Billing, 2004).

Improvement, on the other hand, aims at enhancing more than controlling. This explains why the focus in an improvement-driven system is usually on future plans and promotion of future performance. Therefore, quality assurance for the purpose of improvement is formative. It focuses on using procedures and criteria designed to provide multiple sources of information that feed back into practice on a regular basis. It also aims to increase the motivation of HEIs to improve performance. As a formative approach, data are continuously gathered to inform improvement.

Reports on accountability are different from those on improvement. Reports produced to satisfy accountability requirements are usually linked to funding and are primarily meant for an external audience. Reports aiming at improvement commonly contain recommendations, addressed mainly to an academic audience. However, in some countries such as the UK, regular visits take place, along with various follow-up procedures to check progress. In such systems, follow-up is conducted by quality assurance agencies, that is, government-appointed bodies with an interest in the HEI.

Both the accountability and the improvement agendas have impacted on HEIs considerably because they require HEIs to demonstrate responsibility for quality and standards (in line with the definition provided in section 1.5. Moreover, when HEIs build their quality systems they need to keep in mind that they will have to provide information on them that should be accessible to stakeholders, as well as to national and (sometimes) international agencies.

In a further complication, as demonstrated in Figure 8 by Harvey (2004), accountability, control and compliance are different. This view aligns with that of Jeliazkova and Westerheijden (2002), who assert that higher education systems may encounter different contingencies that are best addressed through different types of quality assurance, as seen in the following table.

Problem	**Role of Quality Assurance**	**Information base**	**Nature of external review**
Phase 1: Serious doubts about educational standards.	Identifying sub-standard educational programmes.	Descriptive reports, performance indicators.	Summative; accreditation, checking standards. Report to state.

Phase 2: Doubts about the efficiency of the higher education system and/or institutions.	(a) Public accountability. (b) Creating quality awareness in institutions	Descriptive/strategic reports ('self-selling') covering: (a) performance; (b) procedures.	Ranking of institutions. One report to state and institutions. Identifying good practices
Phase 3: Doubt about innovation capacity and quality assurance capacity of institutions.	Stimulate self-regulation capacity of institutions. Public accountability.	Self-evaluation reports about: (a) procedures, (b) performance.	Audit report to: (a) the institution, (b) the state.
Phase 4: Need to stimulate sustainable quality culture in institutions.	Split between: (a) improvement based on self-regulation; (b) public accountability	Split between: (a) self-evaluative reports about processes and strategies based on strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT), and benchmarking; (b) self-reporting about performance indicators.	Split between: (a) audit report to the institution; (b) verifying data to be incorporated in public databases.

Table 4: Phases in the Development of the Role of Quality Assurance Systems. Source: Jeliazkova and Westerheijden (2002, p. 435)

Table 5 illustrates how the hierarchy provides a learning curve in the development of Quality Assurance systems. It starts with a need to define standards in phase 1 and ends with the aim of sustaining the quality culture. Parallel to that is a range of problems accompanying the different phases. The basic problem a sector might suffer from is lack of standards; therefore, doubts about the provision are likely to be dominant. Phase 2 focuses on ensuring accountability, so external review would give more information to the public in the form of ranking and audit reports. Phase 3 will focus on the self-regulation capacity of an institution, on the expectation that it has reached a stage where innovation and QA capacity are better developed than in the previous phases. Phase 4 emphasizes self-evaluation and improvement.

In parallel, the nature of external review also changes over time. It starts with accreditation and summative reviews and moves the focus from content to process.

In terms of understanding both the complexity discussed earlier and the notion of a developmental hierarchy in the sphere of Quality Assurance, a potentially useful framework is provided by Perellon (2007), who highlights the following dimensions of it:

- Control: who should control the QA process?
- Objectives: what should be the objectives and aims of this policy?
- Procedures: how are the QA procedures set up?
- Areas: what are the domains covered by the QA procedures?
- Uses: how is the gathered information used?

Following a similar schema, in work on quality assurance in Higher Education in Europe (a study of the national systems of France, Denmark, Netherland and UK), Thune (1998) examines quality assurance while considering how it operates within a local context. The focus was on evaluating quality of teaching and learning as well as research impact. Thune perceives quality assurance as including different, rather common steps: self-evaluation at institution level, external assessment conducted by experts and/or peers, and finally a published report. In relation to these components, Thune examines the level of authority and control a government may or may not exert over its HEIs and the degree of autonomy HEIs enjoy in their operation. Thune questions the extent to which quality assurance is used as a mechanism for controlling the sector and ensuring compliance with government policies and direction.

Harman's (1998) complementary framework creates a helpful categorization with which to compare Quality Assurance in different countries:

a) Responsible agency/Unit: National or institution level? What level of power and autonomy does it have? How dependent or independent is it from the government?
b) Participation in reviews and other activities: the extent to which institutional participation is compulsory or voluntary
c) Methodologies of review and assessment: intrinsic or extrinsic and with what tools?
d) Focus: is it on the national level or institutional level? The 'National' level is further divided into 3 sub-levels: national reviews of disciplines (research and/or teaching); institutional evaluations (reviews of one only or a combination of

teaching, research, QA processes, management, reviews of schools, programmes, or a certain function or unit); and finally, national evaluations of the HE system as a whole.

e) Purpose: improvement or accountability or both?

f) Reporting and follow-up activities: line of reporting (report to concerned institution/unit? Ministry? Agency? Chancellor/Rector? The public?)

Kis (2005) helps to visualize the process while incorporating many of the elements mentioned above through the figure below:

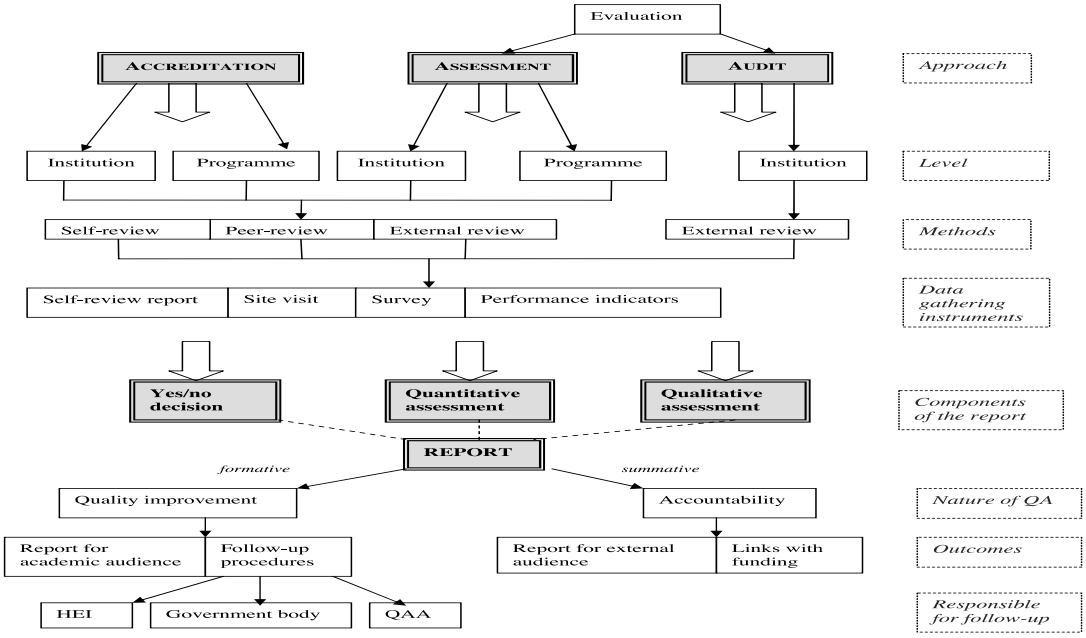

Figure 7: Elements of Quality Assurance Systems in Higher Education. Source: Kis (2005)

According to Kis (2005) and as per Figure 7, quality assurance is understood in terms of approach, level, methods, data gathering instrument/s, outcomes, and the body responsible for follow-up. This model highlights the different approaches to QA: Accreditation, Assessment and Audit. It also illustrates that the three key approaches are applicable (variably) to institutions and programmes in a process that involves self-review followed by a peer review and/or external review. Further, this model highlights the outcome of the three approaches and the way the report produced is likely to be used. However, the model does not specify areas covered under institution and programme quality assurance. Moreover, it limits the purposes of Quality Assurance to quality improvement and accountability, without addressing other purposes such as control and compliance.

A similar model (Figure 8) provided by Harvey (2004) reflects more elements than that seen in Kis's model.

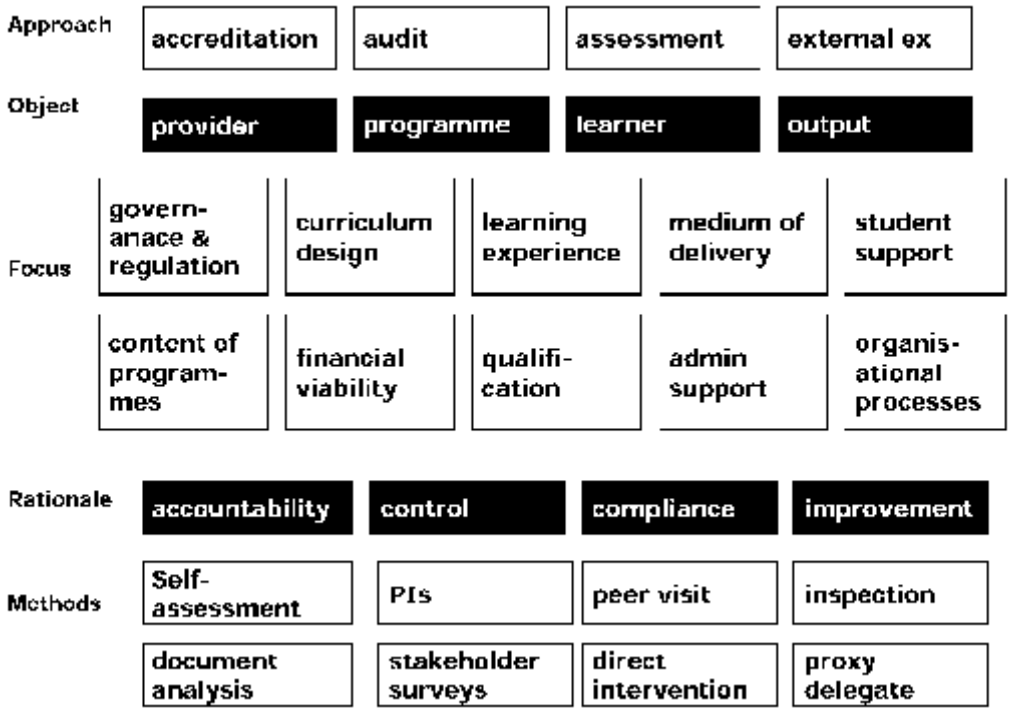

Figure 8: External Quality Monitoring: Approach, Object, Focus, Rationales and Methods

As seen from the two models (Figures 7 and 8), there are three main approaches to quality assurance: **accreditation**, **assessment** and **audit**. Kis classifies assessment and audit as different approaches to evaluation.

Accreditation is defined as a comprehensive approach to evaluation that is applicable at both levels: programme and/or institution. The aim is to evaluate whether a programme and/or institution meets the standards threshold. Institution accreditation, for example, focuses on examination of an institution's resources, procedures and mission. Programme accreditation aims to ensure that curriculum design, for instance, meets standards. Accreditation is taken seriously because when an HEI is subjected to accreditation, the output in the form of a 'yes' or 'no' decision has profound implications for the HEI in terms of permission to operate or termination of its operation. Implications can also take the form of its eligibility for grants (Woodhouse, 1999).

This understanding is adopted by a majority of accrediting agencies. For example, according to the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), an international accrediting body based in the US, accreditation consists of a rigorous external review of a school's ability to provide the highest quality programmes. The accreditation process includes reviewing a school's mission, evaluating curricula to ensure that necessary skills are taught, and examining faculty qualifications to verify the extent to which they are qualified in general and in their specialities, for the purpose of ensuring that student learning is relevant to their field. Most importantly, accreditation aims to ensure that students comprise a well-prepared workforce that can compete beyond local boundaries to meet employers' expectations.

Assessment can cover programmes and/or institutions. Institution assessment is less frequent than programme assessment. Assessment is a graded judgement that evaluates the quality of certain outputs. The outcome of the assessment is expressed in terms of a grade that is literal, numeric or descriptive (Woodhouse, 1999).

An ***Audit*** focuses on institutions in order to evaluate effectiveness. Institutions claim to have certain objectives, so an audit seeks to verify the extent to which institutions' plans and activities are suitable, effective, and in line with the objectives. An audit focuses on processes and their implementation. Most importantly, the audit provides a judgement of the extent to which objectives are achieved (Dill, 2000).

Harvey's model (Figure 8), provides information on the focus of an audit. An institution is judged according to its performance in the following areas: governance and regulation, curriculum design, learning experience, medium delivery, student support, content of programmes, financial viability, qualifications, administrative support, and organizational processes.

An institution can be accredited, assessed and audited, whereas a programme can be either accredited or assessed. Harvey's model shows that assessment can include learners and outputs.

Kis's model illustrates three key methods for reviewing quality: self-review, peer review and/or external review. Self-review is increasingly a key element in Quality Assurance and involves an HEI's engagement in evaluating itself through collecting data and analysing and interpreting information on its daily operation. It requires preparation and submission of a

written report containing a description of how an institution's objectives align with its mission, as translated into procedures and activities.
Peer review is carried out by an external party, in this case peers, i.e. other academics in the same discipline. Peer review dominates research evaluation and is increasingly used for evaluating teaching and learning. According to Eaton (2004), academic and administrative peers become involved in reviewing the self-evaluation documents as part of the institution accreditation process in the US.

Finally, an external review is a panel of local and international members, in addition to peers and sometimes representatives from other stakeholders, who visit the institution to assess and – it is hoped – verify the self-study report submitted by HEIs.

Self-review, peer review and external review represent elements of quality assurance. Van Vught and Westerheijden (1994), emphasizing the importance of wider publication of the outcomes of these processes, advocate a public report with varying degrees of confidentiality on particular evaluation results.

Of course, for any of these approaches to work, it is essential to know the type of data to be used. Surveys in the form of questionnaires and interviews are not as commonly used as site visits, and are more often used when gathering data for assessment than when doing so for accreditation (Kis, 2005). As for performance indicators, their use has grown as a result of the increasing pressure to provide information to meet the criterion of public accountability (Ewell, 1999). As a policy tool commonly used in the UK and Australia to facilitate comparison among HEIs, they are perceived as helpful in trying to control the increasingly growing sector. Performance indicators vary and can be classified, according to Ewell (1999), as

- Hard statistics, such as student numbers, graduate numbers, per capita expenditure, post-completion destinations and so on. Yet it is not enough to depend on them alone, due to the possibility of statistics reflecting a distorted reality when there are reliability and validity issues. There is also the issue of the experiential nature of education and learning.
- Judgement calls are therefore used to reflect complex qualitative data. Examples would be judgements related to efficiency and effectiveness of plans and systems,

such as success in implementing learning approaches, strategy and adequacy of institutional assessment processes.

- Ratios and indices based on hard statistics such as ratios of applicants to places, student completion rates, retention rates, cost-per-credit. Again the issues of validity and reliability, together with questions of calculation and definition, affect the appropriateness of using this type of performance indicator.
- Second order statistics refer to measures of underlying conditions that cannot be directly measured, such as student learning (using assessment and examination) or student satisfaction (using interviews and surveys). Interpretation here requires the use of another set of data when a first-order data set would be incomplete on its own.

The above data-gathering approaches are used to help inform decisions about institutions. Whether the judgement is in the form of yes/no, is quantitative or qualitative, or depends on a particular level, method and approach, it is expected to take the form of a report that helps to meet the purposes of quality assurance. However, reports may or may not be published. In some cases only selections or summaries are published.

Finally, Harvey's model (Figure 8) proves useful for illustrating the different methods used for monitoring quality: self-assessment, performance indicators, peer visit, inspection, document analysis, stakeholder surveys, direct intervention and proxy delegate.

Harvey's model can be considered next to Kis's model. Harvey provides more information on the focus of the QA approaches, and includes more purposes of QA as well as the methods of external quality monitoring. These two models are relevant to answering the third research question: How do participants see transnational partnership as a contribution to quality?

3.8 Conclusion

To conclude, in this chapter I have reviewed the development of the concept of quality in the context of commercial, for-profit business and how it is transferred to education. Changes within the higher education arena and in supra-governmental, governmental and public expectations of and demands on higher education have seen the emergence of requirements for internal and external measures of accountability, control, compliance and improvement, so that quality assurance has become a key component of the management of higher education at both national and institutional levels.

In this chapter, I have also explored the various ways quality can be defined, conceptualized and operationalized in the higher education sector, and highlighted the challenges associated with the effort to develop quality assurance systems for higher education. It has found that creating effective quality assurance systems is challenging for many reasons. First, there are various interpretations associated with quality. These interpretations are influenced not only by contextual and cultural dimensions, but also by the presence of numerous stakeholders, which adds to the complexity.

In the context of Oman, the obvious stakeholders involved in higher education are – inevitably – primarily Omani, including the government, other public bodies, employers, students, parents and families, the staff of the HEIs, and the wider public. However, there are other key stakeholders, including international partners and, in the case of private sector higher education provision in Oman, the transnational institutional affiliates.

Without abandoning the complex question of quality, therefore, the following chapter considers transnational higher education and how it – and more specifically the key stakeholders operating within it in Oman – interacts with the quality agenda, and how in turn that interaction influences and impacts on the experience of academic staff in private sector HEIs in Oman, as a key stakeholder group.

Chapter 4: Transnational Higher Education (TNHE)

4.1 Introduction

As seen in Chapter 3, the Quality agenda in Higher Education emerged during a period when key forces such as massification, internationalization, diversification, pressures on funding, and privatization played a major role in changing the educational context. Furthermore, this agenda emerged when expectations of Higher Education increased, both in terms of the contribution that it should make to the economy and to society on the one hand, and in terms of demands for accountability and transparency on the other.

The research study at the centre of this thesis is about quality linked to the internationalization of Higher Education, and about that arena as a context for transnational higher education.

In Chapter 2, it was shown that in Oman, from 1970, higher education has experienced challenges similar to those faced by other countries and that transnational higher education was perceived as a tool for addressing issues related to the quality of provision. International partners were expected to collaborate with the Omani institutions they were partnered with and help them develop capacity and assure quality. Quality systems, for example in the case of *franchise* and some programme arrangements, were delivered mainly as ready-made solutions embedded in the importation of higher education provision from elsewhere.

The focus of this chapter is on exploring the concept of the 'Transnational' in relation to Higher Education through a critical review of a selection of the relevant literature. Inevitably, given the nature of the phenomenon of Transnational Higher Education, this chapter contains necessary descriptive material.

The chapter commences with a brief review of the key concepts of globalization and internationalization to clarify the relationship between internationalization and Transnational Higher Education (4.2). It moves on to provide some background on the emergence of this phenomenon and of the forces that contributed to its initial appearance in the developed world (4.3). Section 4.4 continues to explore forces at macro/international level in order to highlight the influence of international organizations that have helped to shape Transnational Higher Education (henceforth TNHE).

Section 4.5 explores the motives and factors that cause developing countries to become involved in TNHE. Section 4.6 sheds light on the various forms of TNHE. Section 4.7 deals with countries' active involvement with TNHE followed by section 4.8, which provides the rationales for engaging in the movement of TNHE.

Section 4.9 examines the challenges associated with involvement in TNHE. Finally, section 4.10 offers a conclusion to the chapter.

4.2 Globalization, Internationalization and Transnational Higher Education

As stated in Chapter 3, higher education has become a commodity and travelled across borders in the process known as *Transnational Higher Education*. This has become increasingly evident since the 1980s, having been accelerated by globalization and internationalization of education (ENQA, 2010). Contrary to surface impressions, however, the two concepts – 'internationalization' and TNHE – are not the same (Altbach, 2004).

Globalization is changing the nature of internationalization (Bostrom, 2010). For McCabe (2001), globalization implies standardization across cultures. Friedman (2006, p. 10) refers to the concept of 'flat-world platform' to indicate a global web-enabled platform operating '*without regard to geography, distance, time, and, in the near future, even language*'.

Despite continuing debate as to how to define it, 'globalization' generally refers to the consequences and process of rapid worldwide technological advances. For Giddens (1990, p. 64),

'*Globalization can thus be defined as the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa. This is a dialectical process because such local happenings may move in an obverse direction from the very distanciated distanced relations that shape them. Local transformation is as much a part of globalization as the lateral extension of social connections across time and space*'.

This definition suggests interconnectedness and points to a profound influence of worldwide events on a local environment, making it difficult for any place to survive in isolation from

outside forces. In part, this was the catalyst for the changes that have occurred in Oman since 1970.

Altbach and Knight (2007, p. 290) define globalization as *'the economic, political and societal forces pushing 21st century higher education toward greater international involvement*'. The authors acknowledge that the benefits of globalization include the growth of an international labour market for scholars and scientists, the emergence of research integration, and the use of information technology to enable timely sharing of information. However, they also acknowledge the downside of globalization when it comes to distribution of wealth and knowledge among nations, observing that '*globalization tends to concentrate wealth, knowledge and power in those already possessing these elements*' (Altbach and Knight, 2007, p. 291). Opponents also blame globalization for the spread of the capitalist mentality that leads to competition and materialism. Similarly, opinions vary as to whether globalization leads to the spread of Western norms and loss of identity or, on the contrary, fosters a stronger sense of identity.

For many, including individuals, communities and governments in the 'developing world', the perceived benefits of globalization seem to be attractive despite the downsides that can include increasing inequality between countries. Yet, as will be shown in section 4.3, forces pushing in the direction of globalization may not necessarily be local.

At this point, it is important to highlight the relationship between TNHE and internationalization. Knight (2013, p. 172) clarifies that TNHE (also known as cross-border higher education) is not synonymous with internationalization as some might think. In fact, TNHE is '*one part of the complex process of internationalization*' that is seen in the form of mobility. Mobility includes the movement of people, programmes, providers, and projects/services as well as policies (Figure 9). However, when treated within the borders of a country or an education institution, internationalization is reflected in many HEIs' recent focus on research, having curriculum that caters to international students and on increasing access to education.

The term was originally associated with the exchange of students and programmes. However, it has grown to acquire a broader meaning associated with institutions' strategic initiatives. Van der Wende (1997, p. 18) defines internationalization as

'*Any systematic effort aimed at making higher education responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalization of societies, economy, and labour markets*'.

For higher education institutions, it represents an emphasis on certain aspects of their operation, including preparation of students for increasing international exchange.

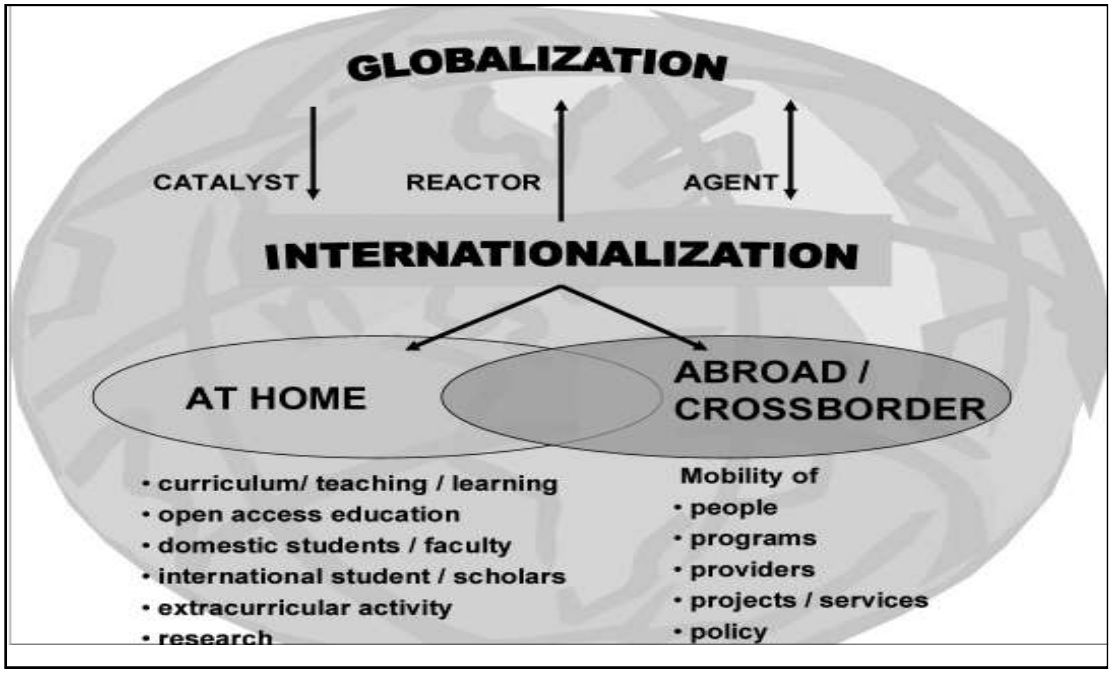

Figure 9: Two Pillars of Internationalization: At Home and Cross-Border Education. Source: Knight (2012)

Features that have been called the *fundamental aspects of globalization* (sometimes regarded as the consequences of globalization) include trade liberalization, changes in government structure, market economy, the knowledge society, and information and communication technologies (Knight, 2005). This view is supported by Ginkle (2003), who argues that today's universities are experiencing tremendous transformation caused by globalization, the all-pervasiveness of information technologies, development of knowledge societies and economies, and debate about the public or private nature of higher education.

These aspects have impacted on all sectors of the economy and society, presenting both challenges and opportunities for HEIs, with increasing emphasis in many institutions in the 'developed world' on proactive strategic management of attempts to address the challenges and seize the opportunities, as illustrated in Table 29 (Annex G). The implications of internationalization implied in this table suggest purposeful action and intentional effort at

micro and macro level to achieve certain rewards. This is seen in the scope of recently introduced activities that HEIs should focus on. For example, the technology dimension and the need to reach students across borders caused seeing new innovative ways of teaching in universities and the emergence of new networks that are active in this field.

Internationalization of higher education, in response to the wider forces of globalization, has therefore drawn many Western universities to establish a presence in other countries, perhaps largely for financial benefit.

Such a presence is evident in the Arabian Peninsula, including Oman in various forms, as will be explained in section 4.5. In addition, and as set out in Chapter 2, the GCC countries have realized the importance of the knowledge economy to their futures, and therefore have used privatization and TNHE to expand opportunity for participation in higher education. Internationalization has also been used as a means of reforming and modernizing higher education in the GCC states, Oman included. Oman has turned to the transnational aspect of internationalization, especially by signing trade agreements that have brought with them an obligation to reduce barriers to 'trade'.

The Council of Europe, in the *Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education* (2002), defines TNHE as:

'*All types of higher education study programmes, or sets of courses of study, or educational services (including those of distance education) in which the learners are located in a country different from the one where the awarding institution is based. Such programmes may belong to the education system of a State different from the State in which it operates, or may operate independently of any national education system'.*

This definition suggests that TNHE applies to students who are part of international programmes, but who remain in their own countries. TNHE is also used interchangeably with terms such as 'cross-border', 'borderless' and 'offshore' education (Knight, 2013). However, unlike borderless education, the concept of cross-border education acknowledges the existence of borders, which acquire relevance when regulation, funding and accreditation are involved.

The same *Code of Good Practice in the Provision of Transnational Education* (2002) defines a transnational arrangement as:

'An educational, legal, financial or other arrangement leading to the establishment of (a) collaborative arrangements, such as: franchising, twinning, joint degrees, whereby study programmes, or parts of a course of study, or other educational services of the awarding institution are provided by another partner institution; (b) non-collaborative arrangements, such as branch campuses, offshore institutions, corporate or international institutions, whereby study programmes, or parts of a course of study, distance learning or other educational services are provided directly by an awarding institution'.

According to the definition above, a provider can either work independently or in collaboration with others, each resulting in different types of education products or services. This could include media and publishing businesses, private and for-profit providers, corporate universities and educational services and brokers.

In some countries, the terms 'onshore' and 'offshore' are used to differentiate between students in home campuses and those overseas (Edwards, Crosling and Edwards, 2010). However, other countries use the term 'international' students to refer to foreign students in the institutional 'home' campus and TNHE students to refer to those who are studying overseas or in a different country.

In this study, Transnational Higher Education and Cross-border Education will be used to mean the same thing. 'Onshore' and 'offshore' are used to differentiate between students at home campuses and overseas. International universities may be referred to as providers, international partners or affiliate partners. However, local universities will be referred to as receivers and local partners.

According to Jianxin (2009, p. 624), countries that become involved in TNHE are motivated by four key objectives: '*generating economic revenue, boosting capacity building, developing human resources, and promoting international understanding'*. In fact, these motivating factors underpin the forces that give rise to and shape TNHE in the first place.

4.3 Forces Giving Rise to Transnational Higher Education

Higher education has crossed borders for different reasons. A review of the literature revealed that TNHE began as a developmental initiative (Feast and Bretag, 2005; Currie, 2005). More developed countries crossed borders to help the less developed ones to build their capacity and develop their economy.

Countries such as Australia, the UK and Canada gave financial support and educational aids to help Third World countries build capacity. Moreover, in 1977, Australia launched the Colombo Plan for Cooperative Economic and Social Development to provide aid for the developing countries of the Pacific Islands and Southeast Asia (Bryne, 1994). Full and part sponsorships were offered to students to come and study in Australia. The initiatives to help students began with the expectation of attracting limited numbers, but sponsorships resulted in a greater response than anticipated.

Culturally, internationalization of education is expected to deepen cultural understanding and provide opportunities for global competitiveness. Promoting others' cultures and learning foreign languages are examples of means by which the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) promotes internationalization of tertiary education (Gribbon, 1994).

However, the above emphasis of TNHE shifted as a result of governments' policy changes. Decisions to cut funding due to economic factors began to dominate in developed countries in the 1980s, and exporting countries started charging fees to international students in order to make up for funding cuts, thereby shifting the balance of responsibility from government to users (de Zilwa, 2005). The change in exporting countries' orientation from donating to charging fees, and from helping other countries develop their economy to worrying about their own economy, is however not the only factor shaping TNHE.

Jianxin (2009) asserts that, while TNHE is mainly economy oriented, it has increasingly become dominated by market principles. In the mid-1980s, tertiary education was declared an exportable commodity and, consequently, governments adopted a more commercial approach by developing policies that allowed HEIs to offer tertiary education to paying oversees students (OECD, 2004). TNHE thus entered a new stage characterized by marketization of education.

Marginson (2003, p. 2) refers to the way universities in the UK were pushed towards a commercial approach to higher education provision when government policies were '*inspired by the new-liberal "revolution" set in train by the Thatcher government in the UK and centred on deregulation and privatisation*'. Competition to attract international students accelerated TNHE as universities were compelled to rely on their entrepreneurial skills to recruit students (Slaughter and Leslie, 1999).

Of course, TNHE goes beyond attracting international students to seeing higher education as an exportable commodity travelling to other countries. As mentioned earlier in Table 29 (Annex G), globalization caused universities to foster internationalization across their activities. As a result, a broad spectrum of international collaboration emerged in the form of:

- Student and faculty exchange
- Joint research activities
- Faculty development efforts
- Quality assurance activities
- Assessment, testing and evaluation
- Collaborations to strengthen institutional management (Sakamoto and Chapman, 2011)

It is reported that transnational higher education has expanded massively for some countries. For example, in 2010, the number of students studying for a UK qualification off-campus exceeded the number of their counterparts studying on-campus (Lawton et al., 2013).

The above section sheds light on circumstances and driving forces in the exporting countries and to a lesser degree those in the importing countries. But other driving forces emerged as a result of the efforts of and influence exercised by international organizations.

4.4 Influence of International Organizations

International organizations have played a role in shaping TNHE, especially after its potential economic benefits were grasped. For example, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has become a key player influencing education since the 1990s by including educational services in its framework of trade in services, as explained in Chapter 1.

The framework of the *General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS)* includes modes of educational supply in which TNHE is treated as a commercial activity on the same terms as any other goods or services supplied to 'consumers'. Trade in education has been similarly encouraged by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The OECD, aided by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), collaborated with other countries to run the *International Forum on Trade in Educational Services* in 2002, which set a structural framework and policy imperative to promote a neo-liberal trade and fiscal philosophy worldwide. Debts incurred by some developing countries were cancelled and/or rescheduled, provided that the debtor countries embrace the IMF programme of economic structural adjustment (Williamson 2009, cited in Donna and Al Manthari, 2010), which requires shrinking the state and promoting private enterprise and competitive markets.

The impact of such international organizations seems to be powerful and to go beyond trade matters to influence more substantive aspects of education. Teichler (2004, p. 5) states that

'*In the past three or four decades, we noted quite similar debate in many countries. The striking similarity amidst obvious variety between countries often evoked suspicions that a strong influence of supra-national agencies exists and has spread these ideas like epidemics which higher education actors and observers are happy to take up any new terminological fashion*'.

Such influences have extended to Arab and GCC countries affecting their plans for reforms, as mentioned in Chapter 2. Issues concerning import and export of education services and activities have become important in the education reform debate in many countries, especially in countries involved in TNHE whether as senders or receivers (Huang, 2007). However, the influence of international organizations' policies on TNHE is perceived negatively by many scholars, especially when it comes to developing countries.

For instance, Jianxin (2009, p. 636) voices concerns that agreements such as GATS disadvantage developing countries and weaken their ability to control their education systems, without necessarily contributing to those systems' improvement. Jianxin argues that if higher education is managed according to the WTO's rules, inevitably a country's jurisdiction and regulation in education will be weakened. It would be only the developing countries bearing the negative impact of the WTO's control over their higher education. In addition, there would

be foreign institutions flooding the markets with programmes aimed at profit making rather than national development.

Ziguras and McBurnie (2015, p. 148) seem to agree with the view that TNHE is characterized by an uncontrolled quest to generate income and plug the funding gap, when they describe it as *'the most blatant example of the unbridled pursuit of profit'*.

At a different level, supra-national forces played another role in TNHE with policies formulated at countries' individual national level but pushed more widely by their international activities. For example, the desire to ensure the transition to a digital, knowledge-based economy and society caused European Union education policymakers to set strategic goals for Europe in the 2000 Lisbon Council, the aim being to '*become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion'* (Europe Commission, 2000). One consequence has been the development by European universities of higher education with a truly global reach through the introduction of MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), whereby enrolments on a single course can number in the hundreds of thousands, thus fundamentally changing the nature of teaching and learning in higher education as well as firmly moving some universities into the sphere of 'global brands'.

While such forces as those considered above are regarded as 'push' factors justifying the efforts of universities in exporting countries to 'go overseas', there are other appealing 'pull' factors attracting them to do the same (Jianxin, 2009). These factors derive mainly from need and the shortage of educational provision in some countries. The inability of the developing countries to meet the demand for expansion in their higher education sector has helped to encourage the key exporters of education (in relation to the GCC, mainly Australia, the UK and the US) to be innovative in forms of TNHE provision, as explained below.

4.5 Transnational Higher Education in Developing Countries

Generally speaking, many developing countries over recent decades have witnessed demographic and economic growth that presented increasing demand for services, including higher education. However, governments' inability to meet variable public demands has caused them to seek alternative options. For example, Southeast Asian countries like Malaysia and Singapore are believed to have contributed to the growth of TNHE due to their inability to satisfy the demand for higher education during the 1980s when they experienced economic

growth (OECD, 2004) but could not cope with the attendant pressures to improve services and build capacity.

Factors such as the need for skilled employees and the inability of education seekers to leave their countries or meet the expense of studying abroad have combined with other factors, such as the growth of commercial entrepreneurship in these countries, to promote TNHE and the related privatization of higher education. In the case of Malaysia and Singapore, Australian universities collaborated with private educational providers through franchising arrangements (Lim, 2011).

In most developing countries, the public/private balance has developed much more as a result of a lack of provision by public institutions than as an explicit government policy. Only in certain countries, such as Chile and Portugal, has private sector provision of higher education been stimulated as part of government policy to improve participation rates. This contrasts with the experience in many more countries (such as South Africa, Kenya and Brazil), where the expansion of private higher education is due to a failure of public/state provision (Moja and Cloete, 2001, p. 24).

According to Stella (2005, 2006), there are conflicting views on TNHE. Supporters view it as a tool for capacity building in developing countries, since technology utilization, for example, could increase chances for more learners to benefit from courses taught in another country. This view also sees the benefit to a host country's HEIs through being linked with prestigious international partners who have an interest in disseminating and transferring knowledge and promoting scientific progress (Brandenburg, 2012).

Others (especially academics) are skeptical, as they believe that TNHE treats education as a commodity and carries the imperative of revenue/profit generation, not to mention putting developing countries at a disadvantage.

Appraisal of the literature on TNHE as it has developed over time reveals that it has evolved to produce a shift from cooperation to competition (Knight, 2005; Ziguras and McBurnie, 2015)

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4.6 Forms of Transnational Higher Education

As mentioned in section 4.1, mobility is considered a key feature of globalization (Van Damme, 2000; Scott, 2000). Education mobility can be seen in terms of people, providers, projects and programmes. Programme and institution mobility is a relatively recent phenomenon, unlike student and staff mobility, which are older and more familiar. In fact, Knight (2013) believes that there are three generations of cross-border education: the first generation is about student and people mobility. The second generation of mobility has seen movement of programmes and providers. However, the third generation of cross-border education introduces education hubs.

It is necessary to clarify the characteristics of these three generations of development.

A) People mobility represents the relatively long-established traditional form in which students, researchers, professionals, consultants, experts and administrators cross national boundaries to provide services in the students' 'home country'. The roots of this lie in the network of older European universities, where movement of students and teachers across borders was common.

It has been estimated that by 2025, a total of 4.9 million international students will be involved in TNHE (Blight, 1995).

Of course, mobility now also includes projects in the arena of academic services and research, curriculum development, capacity building and so on. Sakamoto and Chapman (2012) use the term 'non-instruction-oriented programmes' to refer to such collaborations. In these activities, the motives for partnership and collaboration might include promoting brand recognition, increasing market share, and furthering national strategic interests. Collaboration is more opportunistic, and is built around a certain activity. Non-instruction programmes are likely to originate through activities of individual faculty members. Therefore, the life span of each such programme is linked to the interests of its faculty.

B) Provider mobility refers to an education provider moving and crossing borders to other countries to work independently or with a partner. The partner could be another university, a professional body, a commercial education provider or an industrial body. Provider mobility can be seen in the following forms: branch campuses, independent institutions, acquisition/merger, study centre/teaching site, virtual university and affiliation/networks.

1. *Branch Campus* refers to a campus in one country established by a provider from a different, exporting country. The extent of investment and involvement in education delivery in the foreign country may vary. However, the power of awarding qualifications remains mainly with the exporter.
2. *Independent institution provision* takes place when an exporter offers education in the foreign country fully independently of its 'home base'.
3. *Acquisition/merger* refers to a foreign provider buying part or the whole of an educational institution in a foreign country.
4. *Study centre/teaching site* refers to the establishment by an exporter of a centre for courses or programmes in a foreign country, either independently or in collaboration with a local provider.
5. *Virtual university* refers to education offered through modes of distance education. An exporter may provide degree programmes and courses in a foreign country without being involved in face-to-face support services.
6. *Affiliation/networks* are collaborations between countries, through different types of partnerships, to deliver courses and programmes. They may include the establishment of institutions and networks. Delivery of education to the foreign country can vary between distance and face-to-face modes.

The United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia are the countries considered most actively engaged in international education provision in other countries, making them traditionally the largest exporting providers (Bennell and Pearce, 2003; Hatakenaka, 2004). For example, in 2013 the number of transnational students enrolled in UK universities (off-campus) was stated to be 598,925, according to the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2014). In Australia, the number of transnational students represents 33.4% of the total of overseas students (AEI, 2014). However, the situation differs slightly in the US due to the federal government's limited role in higher education regulation. Therefore, offshore students constitute a smaller number.

These developed countries vary in their TNHE strategy. For example, the US has active for-profit HEIs that are more interested in building branch campuses. The US is also active in offering massive open online courses (MOOCs). In 2011, the number of people who had taken at least one online course was believed to be 6.7 million (Allen and Seaman, 2013).

However, the UK, Australia and New Zealand concentrate on programmes and activities such as franchising and articulation. This explains why these three countries, especially the UK and Australia, are sufficiently concerned about their cross-border provision to have established regulations, codes and guidelines to control it.

Ziguras and McBurnie (2015) argue that the exporting countries share three key concerns. First, they fear that if transnational activities are not regulated or subjected to quality assurance scrutiny, unregulated provision might damage their reputation. Second, the exporting countries hold their higher education institutions accountable for the public funds they receive; therefore, they want to ensure that public funds are not used for unintended purposes. Finally, with the expansion of transnational activities, the exporting countries have put some effort into encouraging receiving countries to adopt regulatory frameworks conducive to such expansion.

South West Asian and some Middle Eastern countries are the major countries with an interest in attracting foreign education/educators (Greene, 2008). Some, such as the UAE and Qatar, encourage distinguished HEIs to set up campuses in their own countries (Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU], 2007a, 2008). The UAE is considered the biggest host country, with 33 international campuses, while Qatar has 11 branch campuses, China has 32 and Singapore 14 (Lawton and Katsomitros, 2012). Hosting branch campuses is an important form of provider mobility and commercial presence, in which the foreign provider moves to another country. This model of TNHE, the dominant model in the UAE and Qatar, differs somewhat from the model of transnational higher education activity in Oman, where programme mobility, rather than provider mobility, is encouraged.

C) Programme mobility takes the form of courses, programmes, degrees and postgraduate work. As a consequence of its expansion, new types of programme have emerged such as franchise, twinning, joint/double award, articulation/validation, and online/distance programmes (Knight, 2011).

i. A *franchise* is an arrangement whereby a TNHE provider authorizes a local provider in a different country to deliver services, programmes or courses in a local context, with the TNHE provider awarding the qualification. Franchising agreements vary, depending on the degree of involvement of the TNHE provider in the receiving local context when it comes to responsibilities such as teaching, management, assessment and income/profit-sharing. Franchising is a popular mode of TNHE delivery. While

there is a degree of customizing in franchising agreements, arrangements need to comply with regulations in the context of the local provider.

ii. *Twinning* consists of agreements that allow students in one country to study the first part of the course in their local institution and gain course credits, and then to complete the remaining part in the TNHE provider institution. In some cases, a franchising agreement is combined with a twinning arrangement, to give students the opportunity to experience a foreign environment. The term *articulation* is used to describe agreements used in this type of provision. Qualification is provided by the TNHE provider. However, agreements for twinning have to comply with regulations in the TNHE provider context.

iii. *Double/joint degree* is an arrangement between two different providers in two different countries to offer a programme. However, it allows students to receive a qualification from both countries, so the qualification carries the logos of both awarding institutions. In this case, while arrangements are customized depending on each initiative, regulations of both countries are taken into consideration.

iv. *Articulation* refers to the agreements that allow students to gain credits from two different providers: the TNHE and the local one. In some cases, students can gain additional credits for work done with the provider who is not awarding the qualification.

v. *Validation* refers to arrangements that allow a country to recognize the qualification gained in another country. A TNHE provider awards a qualification to students in the receiver's campus. However, there are cases where the awarding TNHE does not teach the same course at its own campus and this raises concerns regarding quality.

vi. *Virtual/distance* refers to delivery of programmes online or through distance learning. This mode of delivery does not involve face-to-face support.

Ziguras and McBurnie (2015) use the term 'partner-supported programmes' to refer to foreign programmes that are delivered at a local partner campus. In this sense the foreign partner is

the awarding body and is responsible for setting the curriculum and assessment. However, responsibilities for teaching are shared between the awarding body and the local partner.

D) Education hubs: As a third generation variant, this can include people and programme mobility (generations 1 and 2). However, education hubs are planned for the purpose of building a critical mass in order to exert major influence in the education market at supra-national regional level. Countries attract foreign researchers, programmes, students or companies for knowledge production, education and innovation (Knight, 2013). Countries interested in becoming education hubs have regulatory policies that encourage trade in services, are consequently more open to having foreign branch campuses, and see benefits at a number of levels (Sia, 2014).

While Oman is currently not involved in TNHE in the form of an education hub, Brandenburg (2013), anticipates that Oman might shift its policies in order to emerge as a future hub for education given its strategic location in the heart of the Indian Ocean Rim.

The above forms of transnational higher education reflect its growing complexity. Both importing and exporting countries need to cope with such complexity and address its challenges, not least in the sphere of quality, as set out in Chapter 3 above.

Discussion concerning the different modes of delivery revolves around provider recognition, awarding of credits, qualification recognition, intellectual property, and allocation of responsibilities between the two parties of sender and receiver. Such issues can pose challenges to national systems and to national regulation.

4.7 Transnational Higher Education Activity

Between branch campuses and programme partnerships in the form of validation and franchise agreements, the GCC countries have become among the most dynamic centres for TNHE worldwide (Brandenburg, 2012). As Baird (2006) argues, in cases where TNHE is significant in terms of providing education, then countries may wish to consider the impact of such provision and the extent to which it contributes to national priorities, given the competitive global market they operate in.

Naidoo (2009) helps us to understand TNHE increasing activity through Figure 11 (Annex G) which illustrates (a) Import and export activity in some countries regarding TNHE, concerning

both institution and programme mobility, and (b) TNHE markets: a pictorial representation of import activity (both institution and programme mobility). The export and import illustration exemplifies the way education is treated as a commodity bought and sold in the different markets and how the GCC countries are dealing with it.

The figure shows how the leading countries classify compared to other countries' involvement in TNHE. The UK, Australia and the US are within the key exporting countries, while Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, China and India appear as major importers.

The same figure also reveals how the GCC countries have acquired a place on the map as large importers since the 1990s. Being blessed with oil wealth, the GCC countries, Oman included, have been able to fund their education systems and attract international universities, considered therefore as emerging hosts of TNHE. In this sense, the GCC countries offer a different model of TNHE from that in, say, Africa where donors and sponsors supply education as part of aid schemes.

However, the above activity implies that imports go beyond the commonly explicit modes mentioned earlier in section 4.6. Importing education from the key dominant countries suggests not only the import of education in its modern form, but also other, implicit imports such as the English model of the university (sometimes the French and even the German model), and the domination of the English language, bringing a potential of challenge for countries that speak a different language and have a different background, and perhaps implying certain tensions in relation to values or ideology.

Idriss and Hanauer (2011, p. 181) point out that the American University of Cairo, Beirut and other similar universities created in the Middle East in the late nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century are mirror images of American-style liberal arts education. However, no fundamental change in the nature of higher education within any given nation-state was evident apart from the fact that such models were just typically absorbed into existing university frameworks.

However, the financial, economic and geopolitical imperatives of the early 21st century in a globalized world are very different from those of the late 19th century.

In addition, the number and range of exporting countries is increasing: some of the major importers such as India, Malaysia, China and Singapore have recently started exporting education, even if on a small scale at present. It seems that these countries have succeeded in using transnational activities to build capacity and now have moved to exploring business opportunities abroad, as will be discussed later.

Therefore, despite the fact that Western countries have dominated provision for a long time, the pattern is changing (Sakamoto and Chapman, 2012). Joint programmes are emerging, for example, between China and Russia and between Hong Kong and Singapore, and some countries that have hitherto been primarily importers aspire to emerge as hubs and centres of excellence in education, as is the case with Malaysia and Singapore.

4.8 Rationale behind Transnational Higher Education

As mentioned above, the literature points to the fact that TNHE is motivated by many factors. This section is going to look at the same factors, however, from an analytic point of view and through a different conceptual framework.

Basically, the shortage of higher education provision in developing countries is the primary driving force. Yet, the literature points out that, as learned earlier, countries might pursue TNHE under four key motives, which are reviewed here.

First, poor public funding and increased competition for students in the home countries have created a need for income generation. This has made **revenue** a first-order motive.

Seeking revenue is evidenced in statistics reporting revenue generated in the key exporting countries involved in transnational higher education. In 2006, the United Kingdom's export of educational services was valued at over £9 billion whereas the United States succeeded in generating $14.6 billion (Jie, 2008, cited in Sakamoto and Chapman, 2011). For Australia, Bennel and Pearce (2002) reported annual earnings of $2 billion.

Second, increasing **capacity building** comes up as another strong reason, as developed countries help developing countries construct their domestic educational systems. There is also the aspiration to enhance quality assurance systems through TNHE, such as in Oman.

Third, there is the rationale of human resource development, which refers to developing countries trying to develop a skilled workforce. A fourth motive is **encouraging international understanding**. While the first two motives are associated with developed countries, the third and fourth motives are associated with **developing countries** (Yonezawa, Akiba and Hirouchi, 2009; Altbach and Knight, 2007). Other frequently reported rationales are building international reputation, innovation through new delivery systems (Martin, 2007) and enhancing mutual understanding.

Another way of looking at motives is to consider how they operate at different levels considering that TNHE is a multidimensional phenomenon. Jianxin (2009, p. 631) provides a framework that helps in understanding motives and rationales of TNHE through the concept of 'push' and 'pull' factors that may exist at government, institutional and individual levels, as shown in Table 6.

Factors Level	**Push Factors**	**Pull Factors**
Government level	Generate economic revenue to supplement insufficient government funding	Compensate for insufficient government funding, and generate economic revenue
	Absorb human resources	Widen access, and develop human resources
	Redirect educational surplus	Diversify educational supply, and construct a system of lifelong learning
	Improve the status and profile of national higher education globally	Encourage capital and equipment input, construct new infrastructure
	Advocate national culture and values	Introduce quality resources, and make domestic education more competitive
	Promote international understanding and the internationalization of higher education	Avoid talent and capital drain
	Challenge traditional education and improve quality	Promote international exchange, and spread multiculturalism
Institutional level	Generate income	Generate income
	Increase pool of potential students	Acquire advanced international curriculum at a low cost

	Increase faculty and student exchange opportunities	Improve school infrastructure
	Develop new and international curriculum	Expand enrolment
	Develop resource bases overseas	Import faculty, curriculum and experience in management to promote educational and instructional reform for better quality
	Enhance the academic exchange network	Provide unique quality
	Enhance educational capacity through international extension	Advance international exchange and cooperation
Individual level	Higher threshold for entering domestic institutions due to limited enrolment	Opportunities for studying abroad
	Discriminatory enrolment policies	Relevance and quality of program / curriculum, and flexibility of program operation
	Inferior academic qualities of local institutions	Lower cost than studying abroad, more possibilities of being enrolled
	Limited choices of study areas	Better recognized foreign qualifications and more career opportunities
	Lack of flexibility in delivery	Cultural experiences

Table 5: The Push and Pull Factors in Transnational Higher Education

The above framework is useful for analysing the driving forces or 'push' factors and the attraction or 'pull' factors in any given single context.

Another attempt to explain rationales is provided by Knight (2011). Rationales are seen in terms of cost, selection of course, language and cultural safety aspects, increased access in the home country, quality, recognition of qualifications, and reputation. However, since this study does not examine students or providers, Jianxin's (2009) framework seems to be more relevant to it, particularly insofar as a key research question in this study is: What are the rationales behind transnational partnerships (at national and organizational level)?

With these numerous motivations, Sakamoto and Chapman (2012) warn that even when countries enter into partnerships in the belief that they are gaining something, motivations may differ and institution leaders may not value the same aspects. For example, they may be pursuing different outcomes, value the same outcomes differently, or perceive the value of the same activity in different ways. This warning indicates the importance of investigating transnational higher education partnerships, and the importance of the stakeholder perspective, given the multiple stakeholder environment of higher education.

4.9 Challenges Posed by Transnational Higher Education

The literature shows that TNHE comes with many challenges and is a multidimensional phenomenon, underpinned by global forces that extend their impact further down to the institutional levels.

Some writers perceive the challenges to be threatening at a national level. For example, Jianxin (2009) asserts that TNHE '*tends to erode national educational sovereignty and threatens cultural security of importing countries, undermines the public nature of education, and challenges the existing institutional arrangements for quality assurance, accreditation and qualification recognition in higher education*' (p. 624).

Educational sovereignty refers to the highest authority responsible for handling and maintaining education in a country. Authority is threatened and weakened, especially in developing countries, by the influence of international organizations such as the WTO. According to this argument, developing countries lose autonomy and the organic development of their local education system is undermined.

Second, TNHE is criticized for its lack of consideration of local environmental (cultural) factors. For example, the importer is expected to voluntarily adapt the providers' value systems and educational (curriculum, teaching, learning and assessment) models. Exporting institutions and countries may impose the same standards everywhere, hence reflecting the social value system of the provider and isolating education from the social, cultural and political roots of an importing country (James, 2000).

Third, the international treaties and commercial pressures of the marketplace may create an obstacle to promotion and realization of the role of universities as serving a broad public good (Altbach, 2001b).

Finally, the importation of foreign qualifications and accreditation and quality assurance regimes might undermine not only local versions of these but the reputation of the national system of and policy for higher education in the importing country.

Further, a multiplicity of foreign provision of higher education in an importing country may cause risks at lower levels such as programme and organization level (Ziguras and McBurnie, 2015). At the programme level, the risk can include that of hosting a poor quality programme or adopting one that fails to meet local pedagogic, cultural or other requirements, such as those of local employers. In their research on learners and teachers, Kelly and Tak (1998) concluded that learners use memory as one process of understanding rather than use it as an end in itself. This conclusion is contrary to the Western stereotypes of Asian learners, who are perceived as root learners. In addition, teachers express themselves as highly student centered rather than being harsh authoritarian figures.

Gribble and Ziguras (2003) criticize the scarcity of literature addressing teaching and learning issues, despite the growing body of literature dealing with TNHE.

At the institutional level, TNHE might draw the best and brightest away from local institutions. Threats may also include having to deal with the consequences of collapse of a foreign provider's operation to such a level that students are left without a qualification and the local partner organization is left disadvantaged. In the case of branch campuses, governments may invest resources in terms of infrastructure, land and money, and all this could be lost.

4.10 Conclusion

This chapter has reviewed TNHE in an attempt to highlight its growth and the multiple purposes it serves for both 'developed' and 'developing' countries.

TNHE developed over time through different phases. It began as a developmental initiative with the aim of helping developing countries improve their economy. However, international organizations combined with other forces, especially economic ones, forced new realities by creating a shift in how education was perceived. These changes contributed to not only associating education with profit but also causing the emergence of different forms of education.

Key factors contributing to the growth of TNHE have been the desire to generate revenue, and help developing countries develop their education systems. In addition, rationales include the aspiration to enhance quality and promote cultural understanding.

These rationales attracted countries to increasing involvement in TNHE, whether through people mobility, programme mobility, education provider mobility, or policy and project mobility. However, the increasing involvement created challenges; for example, those related to the control and regulation of the foreign providers in developing countries' markets.

Having said that, the global imperatives seem to be 'pushing' countries to embrace new forms of education. The perceived advantages seem to be 'pulling' factors. However, aligning both factors is an area that requires attention with consideration given to cultural issues.

Chapter 5: Methodology

5.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the broad issue of methodology. It sets out the approach adopted for the conceptualization and design of the research, clarifying the theoretical and practical choices made. Chapter 6 will address the way the research was operationalized on the basis of these choices.

This chapter also sets out the research questions as they emerged from consideration of the

intended focus of my research, as against analysis of both the contextualization presented in Chapter 2 and the outcomes of the review of relevant literature in Chapters 3 and 4.

In Section 5.2, I address the 'big' questions of methodology – the choice of *worldview* and the related ontological, epistemological and other assumptions underpinning the worldview I have adopted. In section 5.3, I consider the related issue of trustworthiness, before giving an overview in section 5.4 of the choice of the semi-structured interview as the key tool used in data collection.

Following this, I set out an overview of the conduct of the research investigation itself in section 5.5 and revisit the research questions in section 5.6. I elaborate on how I approached sampling institutions and informants in the main stage of the research investigation in section 5.7. I then address access and related issues in section 5.8, provide a description of the characteristics of my informants in section 5.9, and explain how I approached consent issues in section 5.10. I set out the approach to data analysis I developed within the overall design in section 5.11 before concluding the chapter in section 5.12.

In wrestling with decisions about methodology and methods, I was conscious of the need to consider my own positioning within the research, as an Omani national and a beneficiary of the changes that have taken place in Oman since 1970 both generally and in education. Therefore, I decided to recognize and make explicit my own interpretations and understandings, as advocated by Silverman (2000) and Langridge (2007). This comes to the fore more prominently in Chapter 5 (Methodology) and Chapter 9 (Conclusions and Recommendations).

5.2 The Approach Adopted

All doctoral research in education is the product of a choice of approaches between qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods (Creswell, 2013; Creswell and John, 2011). The difference between these extends to underlying assumptions that researchers might knowingly or unknowingly bring to their research (Creswell, 2013).

Authors differ in the terms they use to refer to the underlying assumptions of a researcher. For example, Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 4) use the term 'paradigms' to refer to '*The basic belief system or worldview that guides the investigator, not only in choice of method but in ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways'*. However, Creswell (2009) helpfully

prefers to use the term 'worldview' to represent four variations:

- A *Positivist* worldview is associated with what is normally seen as the 'scientific method', usually requiring identification of cause and effect through careful measurement of objective 'reality'. Such a worldview is often found in quantitative research, where it is assumed that the world is governed by laws and theories that need to be tested and refined. A researcher starts deductively with a theory and then collects data that either support or refute the theory. The purpose is to generalize and replicate findings. Strategies of inquiry in quantitative educational research often centre on surveys.

- A *Social Constructionism* worldview, also referred to as *interpretivism*, is associated with qualitative research. Social Constructionism is based on the assumption that individuals seek understanding of their experiences. Therefore, it aims to explore and understand. Unlike the concept of meaning as found in positivism, here meanings are subjective, variable and complex and a researcher relies on participants' views of the situation being studied. Questions become general and broad in order to allow participants to construct the (or their) meaning of a situation. A researcher may address the process of interaction between people, focus on the setting and consider social and historical perspectives. The aim is to inquire before generating a theory inductively. Qualitative strategies for inquiry include phenomenology, ethnography, narrative research, grounded theory and case study. Data collection tools include interviews and observation, often in conjunction with the use of documentary evidence.
- An *Advocacy*/*Participatory* worldview aims to tackle issues of social justice, especially to advance the marginalized. Inquiry is collaborative and completed *with* others rather than *on* others. Researchers integrate research inquiry with 'political' agendas in order to emancipate and free people from constraints, change lives of participants, and change institutions. Both quantitative and/or qualitative approaches can be used.

- A *Pragmatist* worldview does not perceive the world as an absolute unity. Truth is what works at the time. Therefore, it allows researchers to choose whatever best meets their need and purpose. Researchers use many approaches to collect data rather than following one way, so they often use mixed methods approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative procedures.

While Creswell primarily stresses the importance of these worldviews, there are other worldviews that are perceived to be inclusive, that is, to bring different perspectives together, such as critical realism. Critical realism provides a more comprehensive notion, whereby – ontologically – reality is seen as '*something that exists independently of those who observe it but is only accessible through the perceptions and interpretations of individuals*' (Ritchie et al., 2014, p. 21).

In this approach, the real world exists independently of our constructions and perceptions. Critical realists distinguish between empirical reality (experienced) and the actual reality (what happens), so while ideas about a real phenomenon might change, this does not change actual reality (Bryman, 2008). Embracing such a view causes researchers to value the importance of participants' own interpretations of the issues being researched, while understanding that the researched issues may be subject to different types of understanding.

The word 'critical' has appeared in different variants of this idea. For example, Bhaskar (1989) and Campbell (1974) use the term *critical realism*, while Lakoff (1997) prefers *experiential realism*. There is also a version called *constructive realism* (Giere, 1999). However, all these forms of realism are aligned within a belief that there are alternative valid accounts of any phenomena. Frazer (1993) claims that a researcher may adopt critical realism ontologically but interpretivism epistemologically.

In light of the above, a *constructionist/interpretivist worldview* aligns well with my research because the focus of this research is on people's experiences and what they think about a certain phenomenon. My aim is to provide more information on an issue that is not yet fully explored in public documents or the literature (Merriam, 1998), and the *constructionist /interpretivist worldview* aligns with this intention.

To complement this worldview, I approach the research from a qualitative standpoint. The strength of qualitative research is seen in its investigative focus and in-depth nature (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2000). As Bazeley (2013, p. 4) puts it, '*Researchers engaging in a qualitative study focus on observing, describing, interpreting and analyzing the way that people experience, act on, or think about themselves and the world around them'.* This is appropriate to the overall aims of this study and the research questions, though it does not mean that quantitative research in this area would not be useful or relevant. Indeed, there may

be an argument for further research in this area that adopts a quantitative paradigm, using the outcomes from this essentially exploratory study as a formative influence.

Embracing a qualitative design requires behaving and thinking in certain ways, as explained by Creswell (2013, p. 20).

1. In terms of *ontology,* reality is seen by the researcher as not being a singular truth. Rather, it is construed as a multi-faceted phenomenon, with each individual seeing his or her own reality. Research is conducted with the intention of reporting these different perspectives, focusing on participants' voices, using the actual words of different individuals, and presenting their different perspectives.

2. The *associated epistemological position* requires that the researcher tries to get as close as possible to the participants in order to access people's subjective experiences, in the process capturing their varied types of subjective knowledge and understanding of reality.

3. *Axiologically,* qualitative research requires acknowledgement that it is value-laden, and incorporates subjective assumptions. Researchers need to expose their own biases openly and report values actively as they position themselves in the study. They report their own interpretation as well as that of participants.

4. *Methodologically,* qualitative research may use an emerging design shaped by researcher's experience in collecting and analysing data. It is inductive, usually shaped from the ground up, unlike quantitative research, which starts with a theory and often sets out to prove or disprove a hypothesis. In qualitative research practice, a researcher starts with details, describes the context of the study, and repeatedly revises questions on the basis of experiences in the field before attempting to draw some general conclusions that reflect the complexity of reality.

Qualitative research has been used in work that is interested in policy or contains policy dimensions. Policy research, hence, can be explored from different worldviews, especially from a critical/social realist position (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994). Data in applied policy research are generated through a combination of: desk research, document analysis, individual interviews, group discussions and observational work.

My interest in policy is rooted in my exploration of transnational partnership in Oman's higher education system from a policy borrowing viewpoint. As explained in Chapter 3, importing education can be part of a country's participation in a global policy phenomenon (Jakobi, 2009) and also an attempt to find solutions to local educational problems (Roynold and Farrell, 1996). When it comes to policy research, Ritchie and Spencer (1994) classify and group research questions into different categories (p. 174) as illustrated in Table 7.

Category	**Types of Question explored under the category**
Contextual: identifying the form and nature of what exists	What are the dimensions of attitudes or perceptions that are held? What is the nature of people's experience?
Diagnostic: examining the reasons for, or causes of, what exists	What factors underlie particular attitudes or perceptions? Why are decisions or actions taken, or not taken?
Evaluative: appraising the effectiveness of what exists	How are objectives achieved? What affects the successful delivery of a programme or services? How do experiences affect subsequent behaviours?
Strategic: identifying new theories, policies, plans or possible actions	What actions are needed to make programmes or services more effective? How can systems be improved? What strategies are required to overcome newly defined problems?

Table 6: Categories of Questions in Applied Policy Research. Adapted from Ritchie and Spencer (1994)

Researchers' questions may go beyond contextual factors and address more than one of the four categories. I hope to shed light on the phenomenon, contributing not only to a deep understanding of the contextual policy factors relevant to its existence, but also to an adequate explanation of it, with findings that are richly descriptive, expansive, comprehensive and holistic (Merriam, 1998).

5.3 Trustworthiness

Educational research using a quantitative approach is traditionally judged in terms of reliability, validity and objectivity, as is scientific research. However, there is widespread unease about judging qualitative research against these criteria. Guba and Lincoln (1985, 1994), for example, believe that the criteria of *reliability*, *validity* and *objectivity* assume a single reality or truth as favoured by positivists. Instead, they propose *trustworthiness* as a more meaningful construct in qualitative research, comprising *credibility*, *transferability*, *dependability* and *confirmability*.

Credibility corresponds with *validity* in quantitative research where accuracy is concerned. Silverman (2011) cites Rissman's advice regarding the plausibility of qualitative research: '*Persuasiveness is strengthened when the investigator's theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants' accounts, negative cases included, and alternative interpretations considered'*. This view is supported by Peräkylä (2011), who stresses persuasiveness, using evidence from informants and alternative interpretation. I address this requirement in Chapters 6 and 7, using quotes from participants as supporting evidence in relation to the issues discussed.

Credibility is also related to confidence in data, starting with the research site, participants, and data collection methods. *Triangulation* can be used to achieve credibility. Triangulation aims at explaining or mapping out the richness or complexity of human behaviour, *'by studying it from more than one standpoint'* (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 195). It does not necessarily look for agreement across the different sources and standpoints but operates more as a comprehensive, multi-layered means of ensuring that a more accurate account is being given. In this sense, issues are illuminated from different perspectives to provide accuracy even though there might be variations in these perspectives. Triangulation can be achieved by using multiple sources of data, multiple theoretical perspectives, multiple observers or multiple methodologies (Denzin, 1970).

In this research, at the methods level, the employment of semi-structured interviews, desk

research and document review will help to ensure *credibility* via triangulation. At participant level, triangulation is achieved through use of multiple participants in each organization and from other relevant organizations.

Transferability refers to the applicability of the research to other contexts. This is achieved in quantitative research through *generalizability*, using sample representativeness. However, context specificity and uniqueness makes *generalizabilit*y difficult or impossible in qualitative research. Thomas (2010) believes that qualitative researchers should not aim for *generalizability*. Yin (2014) stresses the importance of following systematic procedures and asserts that generalizing is more related to theoretical propositions by adding to understanding.

Dependability is related to what quantitative researchers call *reliability*. In qualitative research, it actually involves the context of the research. Bryman (2008, p. 384) claims that *context* is a *preoccupation* of qualitative researchers. The emphasis on context and description means that there is a focus on seeking explanation and providing detailed accounts of what goes on (Geertz, 2001). According to Bazeley (2013), contextual information is employed at different levels: broader contextual information to situate the whole research, background features of a particular source or case, and situational information relevant to a specific experience or event. In this study, *dependability* is ensured by providing details about Oman as the context for the research, as set out in the early chapters of this thesis.

At an institutional level, it is useful to conduct qualitative research in more than one setting to identify the relevance of contexts and how it affects behaviour (Bryman, 2008). In addition, collecting data from several institutions adds to dependability and makes it possible to understand perceptions, values and behaviours in each context, in order to aid understanding of the phenomenon as a whole. Thus, data for this research are collected from three different educational institutions and four government organizations.

There is also an emphasis on *dependability*, achieved by ensuring transparency and clarity by explaining the theory used. For example, the model used to evaluate the micro dimension of policy, that of Phillips & Ochs (2003), has been made explicit.

As for *confirmability,* the concern is with ensuring that the researcher is conscious of the need to remain as objective as possible, given the fact that complete objectivity is impossible in social research (Bryman, 2009). A researcher needs to demonstrate the ability to avoid

allowing partiality, for example in terms of personal values, to sway the conduct of the research or the presentation of the findings.

5.4 The Choice of the Interview

Given the foregoing, it was almost inevitable that I would be drawn to the interview as a key means of data collection. In order to enable participants to share their experiences and perceptions, voice their points of view and discuss interpretations (Cohen, 2011), in-depth face-to-face interviews were almost self-evidently the appropriate tool.

The choice of interviews in research is based on the understanding that knowledge is generated through conversation and interchange of views (Kvale, 1996), a view which aligns well with the *constructionist/interpretivist* worldview (Merriam, 1998).

Interviews can be structured, unstructured or semi-structured (Thomas, 2011). Structured interviews utilize a predetermined list of questions. While relatively easily administered and coded, the structured interview does not, however, necessarily provide the flexibility needed to expand on a topic. It is criticized for its rigidity on grounds that adhering to questions may not allow access to participants' understanding of the world. Most importantly, reactions to questions represent the investigator's preconceived notions of the world (Merriam, 1998).

By contrast, unstructured interviews are like conversations and allow the interviewee to set the agenda and direction. They are useful when a researcher does not know enough about a phenomenon and as a result is limited in asking relevant questions. Therefore, the unstructured interview is exploratory. It is useful if the aim is to learn enough to form more concrete questions in subsequent interviews. However, a criticism voiced here is that researchers might be overwhelmed and feel lost in the face of divergent, maybe unconnected pieces of information (Cohen, 2011; Merriam, 1998).

I decided to adopt the moderate stance allowed by semi-structured interviews (Bryman, 2008). Semi-structured interviews gave me the opportunity to cover points of interest identified by myself, using an interview guide, while allowing the interviewee the chance to elaborate on different topics. The semi-structured approach also enabled me to clarify ambiguity, follow up on certain points and encourage interviewees to say more on key issues. Therefore, a semi-structured interview was considered to best fit the purpose of this research considering its exploratory, in-depth nature, while maintaining boundaries and focus.

5.5 Overview of the Research Investigation

Silverman (2013) advises adopting the simplest design that allows the purpose of the research to be achieved. In this study, the research investigation was carried out in three different, linked stages as illustrated in Table 8, spanning a period of some 20 months. In Stage 1, the aim was to set direction for the research, confirm the key issues to be addressed, and test the approach, methods and tools. Stage 2, the main stage, was focused on selection of the sites to be investigated and on core data collection, along with key interview participants at these sites. In Stage 3, the aim was to get policy-makers to comment on some key issues that emerged from analysis of the data collected in Stage 2. This sequence helped with the progression of the research especially with cross referencing and triangulation. For instance, this sequence helped verify some of the key issues emerging from the in Stage 2 with the informants in Stage 3, such as various interpretations of key concepts and inconsistency seen in practice in.

Stage	**Stage 1: Summer 2012**	**Stage 2: Spring 2013**	**Stage 3: Winter 2013**
Purpose	Setting direction	Collecting data at institution level	Collecting data at policy-making level
Total number of participants	7	29	6
Roles of participants	Dean, Academics, Director of Department	Admin, academics, Deans, QA managers, top management	Policy-makers and government officials
Institution/s from which informants/ participants came	College of Banking and Financial Studies (the college where I work)	3 different non-government universities	Oman State Council, Supreme Council for Planning, Ministry of Higher Education

Table 7: Stages of Investigation

During year one of my study, wide reading and the resultant literature review caused me to reject my initial focus and instead focus on quality assurance of international programmes. It was felt that as a topic it had potentially more relevance not only to my own professional development but also to the interests of my employer/sponsor and to the cause of quality of higher education in Oman.

Stage 1 of the investigation, in effect a pilot stage, resulted in another significant shift in my thinking about the research as a whole. Interviews in my own College, with seven purposefully selected staff who were part of either the teaching staff or the management staff of international programmes, were conducted due to ease of access to both information and informants. The aim was to explore current quality issues concerning international programmes. The recorded interviews varied in length between one and two hours. Moreover, the content emphasized issues related to institutional transnational partnerships (a key aspect of international higher education programmes in Oman and elsewhere), that were perceived as critical to the shape, operation, quality and impact of the programmes themselves.

The findings from this pilot phase highlighted the need to try to understand the importance of the transnational partners in the process of helping Omani local institutions develop capacity and good practice, and therefore created a revitalized imperative for the research. This in turn triggered questions regarding the different ways in which foreign partners might operate in Omani higher education, and impelled exploration of their varied approaches and impacts at various levels.

In response to these findings, the main stage of the research explored international institutional partnerships from the perspectives of various actors in three different institutions. This required a shift in focus, not atypical of qualitative research (Creswell, 2013) and the need to be flexible and prepared to change, revisiting themes and issues and reformulating research questions throughout the process (Cohen, 2011).

Following recommendations from the progression board at the end of the first year of the PhD, it was decided that the main stage of the investigation should cover more than one institution in order to provide depth of insight into what was happening in the sector in the context of international partnerships. Therefore, three non-government universities were selected for this stage of the research. Interviews were carried out over multiple visits to these three institutions. A total of 29 participants were interviewed.

In the last stage of the research, the purpose was to elicit views at the policy level (Ministry and Government) to shed light on various issues raised during the second stage.

5.6 Purpose Statement and Research Questions

Over the first year of my study, the purpose of my research had evolved to focus on a current issue of critical importance to higher education in the Sultanate of Oman, namely the influence of transnational higher education partnership (known as affiliation) on non-state higher education provision, and to consider the wider impacts of this on a higher education system that has developed very rapidly over a short period.

The *lens* through which this was examined was that provided by the concept of **policy borrowing**, that is, '*the whole range of issues relating to how the foreign example is used by policy makers at all stages of the processes of initiating and implementing educational change*' (Phillips and Ochs, 2003, p. 451).

Using the lens of policy borrowing as a key conceptual tool, the study sought to explore transnational partnership in terms of approaches, rationales, roles, challenges, outcomes and impacts. The research covering three institutions will be presented, with desk research being complemented by in-depth interviews. These interviews were conducted in two different stages. Interviews in the first stage were with a range of internal stakeholders, acting as key informants from the three universities. This stage was followed by a further series of in-depth interviews with informants at the national level as explained under section 5.9. Research questions addressed in this study are:

1. What are the rationales behind transnational partnerships (at national and organizational level)?
2. What are the approaches experienced in each institution? How do these vary and why?
3. How do informants perceive and experience transnational partnerships and their efficacy?
4. How do they see transnational partnerships as a contribution to quality?
5. What are the implications of the current level of dependence on transnational partnerships on quality provision and on the educational development of the higher education sector in Oman and what issues does the case raise regarding the practice of policy borrowing?

It is important to understand that this research has both micro and macro dimensions. The micro dimension is institutional in terms of investigating perceptions of transnational academic partnerships. This is explored through questions 1-4. However, the macro level is

global, representing the attempt to investigate the impact of educational imports on local education. This is covered in question 5 and – to some extent – in questions 3 and 4.

To clarify the micro and macro dimensions, Table 9 (adapted from Ritchie and Spencer, 1994) illustrates how my research questions relate to their four categories.

Category	**Illustrative questions explored under the category**	**My Research Questions**	**Key concepts from the literature**
1. Contextual: identifying the form and nature of what exists	• What is the nature of people's experience? • What are the key policies that determine action in relation to the topic?	• Research question 1 • Research question 2	TNHE
2. Diagnostic: examining the reasons for, or causes of, what exists	• What factors underlie particular perceptions and attitudes? • What are the problems/issues with transnational partnerships?	• Research question 2 • Research question 3 • Research question 4	TNHE
3. Evaluative: appraising the effectiveness of what exists	• How successful is transnational partnership in terms of quality? • What limits its positive impact?	• Research question 4 • Research question 5	TNHE QA Policy borrowing
4. Strategic: identifying new theories,	• What actions are required to make transnational partnerships more	• Research question 5	TNHE QA Policy borrowing

policies, plans or actions	effective?? • What is required by way of policy changes to ensure that the issues identified are addressed? • How can the benefit of transnational partnerships be maximized for Omani higher education?		

Table 8: Alignment of Research Questions with Categories of Questions in Applied Policy Research. Adapted from Ritchie and Spencer (1994)

The contribution of the research is thus both theoretical and practical. The theoretical contribution sought is one which would add to the literature on transnational higher education in Oman and would, it is hoped, contribute to the ongoing debate on policy borrowing in higher education. My aspiration is that the practical contribution will consist of informing higher educational policy-making and practice in Oman in relation to transnational partnerships.

5.7 Method of Sampling and Research Context

A purposive sample of three non-state institutions was regarded as sufficient for the purposes of this study, in that this number would allow different types of non-state institution to be included but would still be manageable in terms of scope and resources required. In addition, and most importantly, transnational partnership for non-state higher education institutions is mandatory, which is not the case for state institutions.

The three institutions selected had:

- all passed the first cycle of quality audit in the last five years, months apart from each other and all within a span of two years' time, which means that investigation of the issue would be more relevant here than in institutions that had not undergone this audit at the time of conducting the research
- experience with international academic partnerships in some form

- similar histories in terms of date of foundation etc., thus providing a degree of consistency and comparability.

Purposive sampling places emphasis on the selection of units (e.g. people or institutions) due to their direct relevance to the research questions and need for specific information (Bryman, 2008).

The sample selected is homogeneous in status. They are non-state, locally owned, and labelled 'private' universities. The institutions chosen are best described in terms of their student populations, in order to preserve anonymity. They are comparable in terms of student population. As medium-sized universities, they had a student enrolment ranging between 4000 and 6000 at the time of the visit. As for transnational activity, while the three institutions might have a partner from the same foreign country, for example the UK, the mode of partnership and scope might differ depending on the agreement.

As for location, University 2 and University 3 were both more than 200 km away from my place of residence. Fortunately, I was able to commute back and forth in my own car. However, this was not the case with University 3, which was farther away, so that I had to get assistance to reach it.

The participants interviewed came from different backgrounds and represented views from different levels of the same institution. They all took part in international partnerships in the capacity of their work.

Qualitative research is usually carried out with a small number of informants and with a rather informal pattern of questioning (Silverman, 2013). This raises questions about the number of participants needed and the types of questions asked. My intention was to achieve a target of 8-10 relevant participants in each university. This number was felt to be suitable given the parameters of the research, the diversity of voices and the amount of data.

Interviewees were then purposefully selected with the main criteria of selection being:

- Experience with affiliation/partnerships as a result of carrying out relevant duties as teaching faculty, decision-makers and/or management
- Availability and willingness to participate.

Table 10 shows the distribution of the sample across the PHEIs:

University	Number of Participants	Target Achievement
University 1	11 Participants	Target achieved/exceeded
University 2	10 Participants	Target achieved
University 3	8 Participants	Visit was interrupted by severe weather conditions that caused roads being cut off. Yet, the target was achieved

Table 9: Number of Participants in Each University

5.8 Institutional Authorization and Access

The main research stage was conducted in closed private settings and thus depended highly on gatekeeper approval, as will be explained later. Furthermore, access is *overt* in the sense that it is based on informing subjects and obtaining their agreement. This differs from *covert* access, which is obtained without informants' knowledge (Silverman, 2013).

Textbooks differentiate between *closed* or *private* settings (Gaboo, 2008) and *open* or *public* settings (Walsh, 1998). *Closed* refers to settings to which gatekeepers control access as opposed to *open* settings to which there is free, uncontrolled access, for example, public records.

Access to my own workplace in the 'pilot' stage was the easiest to secure and went smoothly. However, securing access in the other research stages required more planning and preparation. Formal written communication with gatekeepers was used when visiting institutions for the first time. While I am considered an outsider, my existing network enabled me to access certain people. My networks were most helpful in the last stage of research with stakeholders (Stage 3).

First, an initial request for access was made through email correspondence. The following documents were prepared and sent:

- A letter introducing the researcher, purpose of the research, characteristics of the

required participants and researcher contact information. It also contained a brief description of how the information gathered was going to be used and confidentially handled.

- A consent form that stated (among other things) that interviews were going to be audiotaped and gave candidates the chance to state their preference as to whether or not they wanted to be audiotaped.

- A participant information sheet for the purpose of collecting some demographic data.

- A letter from the student support office in my host institution, the University of Edinburgh, confirming my status and identity as a postgraduate research student.

The above documents were attached and sent in an email by my supervisor to the (Vice) Chancellors who were contacted either directly, using their personal emails, or through their office directors, depending on the availability of contact. The letters were sent approximately 3 weeks prior to the first visit. During this period, a few emails were exchanged with people identified by the university to specify the date of my arrival in Oman and of the first meeting with them.

The first day after my arrival, I contacted them by phone to confirm my arrival and the time of the meeting. My first contacts were with gatekeepers, mainly top management people such as a Dean, an Assistant Dean and a Vice Chancellor's office manager. The first visit to all three universities served the purpose of clarifying 'intentions' as requested by two out of three gatekeepers. The first meeting turned out to be important, even though the purpose of the research had been explained to them ahead of the meeting.

Despite the reluctance and scepticism sensed during this first meeting, I believe that it was crucial in determining the extent to which they would agree or refuse to accommodate an outside researcher. I was happy that they gave their approval for me to enter the setting. In fact, the support the gatekeepers offered exceeded my expectations. They showed it in different ways:

- Nominating and contacting different participants for me to meet
- Passing contact details of potential participants to me or emailing candidates asking

them to approach me

- Assigning a second contact person in different colleges for me to communicate with. This proved to be very helpful in terms of second contacts receiving me at the entrance and taking me around.
- Giving me permission to approach and contact newly identified candidates without having to refer back to the gatekeepers. I felt that my multiple visits to the institution contributed to building rapport and trust with the gatekeepers to the extent that I didn't have to inform them of newly located participants.
- Allocating a suitable space for me to use during my visits. In two out of three places, I got an empty, equipped office to utilize while waiting to see other participants. In the third institution, I shared an office with an employee.

As mentioned above, once I was allowed inside the institution, further access was secured through networking and snowball sampling. Bryman (2008) uses the term 'snowball sample' to refer to a researcher who begins by contacting a small group that in turns help reach other interviewees.. At the end of an interview, I would ask participants if they knew someone with relevant experience who might be willing to participate. Several senior candidates were identified by this method and this snowball effect helped in targeting a group of interviewees whose affiliation experience went back to the first partnership. This allowed me to trace differences in types and modes of affiliation provision that had been used. Access to the Chancellor and Vice Chancellor was secured through their own Office Directors.

5.9 Participant Characteristics

A. Institutional Level Participants

As advised by my supervisor, I had to be opportunistic and get whoever was relevant and willing regardless of the person's academic background. This decision has contributed to the richness and diversity of sources of data gathered, as illustrated in the tables below.

Table 11 reflects the richness of data sources. It shows that informants came from different institutional levels. Some participants played different roles and had different responsibilities at the same time. At the academic level, they also represent different academic backgrounds. This helps the researcher to look at the issue from different points of view rather than adhering to one single view.

	Department/College	Number
1)	Chancellor/Vice Chancellor	3
2)	Deputy of Vice Chancellor	1
3)	Quality Assurance	4 (2 of whom are in Engineering)
4)	Human Resources	1
5)	Student Affairs	1
6)	Lifelong/Continuous Education	3
7)	Commerce and Business	4
8)	Arts	4
9)	Education	4
10)	Medicine	1
11)	Engineering	3
12)	Information Technology	2

Table 10: Classifications of Participants by Department

In regard to experience, Table 12 below shows that the majority of interviewees had many years of experience in the education field. The minimum number of years of experience was 10 and the maximum was 40 years.

Participant	Total Years of Work Experience	Years of Experience in Oman	Years of Experience in Current Institution
P1	25	10	8
P2	22	16	1
P3	23	8	6
P4	16	11	7
P5	34	16	1
P6	25	25	13
P7	15	4	4
P8	30	2	2
P9	15	7.5	7.5
P10	35	21	10
P11	25	6	6
P12	10	8	5
P13	24	6.5	6.5

P14	30	8	8
P15	22	22	2
P 16	18	6	6
P17	40	12	8
P18	25	8	8
P19	24	24	15
P20	17	10	4
P21	34	5	5
P22	15	6	6
P23	12	12	3
P24	18	10	10
P25	15	5	5
P26	25	13	8
P27	11	11	9
P28	27	19	2
P29	30	20	10

Table 11: Classification of Participants by Experience

In addition, Table 12 reflects a relatively high familiarity with the Omani context. The informant least experienced in the Omani context had spent less than five years in Oman whereas the most experienced had spent more than 35 years in Oman. About 8 participants had 10 or more years of experience in Oman, about 7 had more than 15 years and about 4 had more than 30 years. This long experience of the Omani context contributes to conveying a more reliable view not only about their institutions but also about the sector as a whole.

While the table shows that informants had less experience in their current institution compared to their overall experience in Oman, more than 70% of them had worked for 5 years or more in their current institution. The depth of their experience helped provide rich insight into any changes, impacts, advantages and disadvantages of multiple international partnerships.

Analysis of the demographic data also showed that participants were above 30 years old. Five interviewees aged between 31 and 40 years old whereas thirteen fell in the age group of 40-50 years. The rest of the interviewees were above 50 years old but less than 65 years old. This is not unexpected, given that the majority were experienced people in management positions

and/or had to demonstrate experience in the field in order to be appointed at a university. This, too, is not surprising, given the number of years of experience shown in Table 12.

There was an over-representation of male views, with only two female views located. The time span allocated to the research meant that decisions related to participants had to be made on pragmatic grounds. The need to complete the research within the timescale allocated for doctoral study required me to be realistic in my selection of participants and to work with those who were willing to be involved, thus not allowing me to purposively search for gender representation. I asked for more female participants but unfortunately could not recruit these. Most importantly, I grew to be less concerned about this issue because I felt that this research is concerned with reporting issues relevant to professional and work experience with a focus on an international provider partner. It was also observed that opinions reported by the sample of females found was consistent with those reported by males.

It was very interesting to come across participants who were diverse not only with regard to background but also nationality. Participants came from fourteen different countries, namely: the US (1)[3], Australia (1), the UK (1), Canada (1), Egypt (1), India (3), Iraq (1), Jordan (1), Lebanon (1), Libya (1), Sudan (2), Syria (1), Tanzania (1) and Oman (10) interviewees.

Such diversity is a common feature in the Omani higher education with academic posts being dominant by non-Omanis. Yet, despite this diversity, there was consensus on different issues, as will be explained in Chapter 6.

While the majority are non-Omanis, 19 interviewees compared to 10 Omani interviewees, I managed to capture the views of Omanis through their representation, which amounts to about one-third of the sample. It is worth mentioning that the majority of Omanis were in management positions while non-Omanis consisted mostly of teaching faculty who sometimes had administrative duties as well.

Analysis of the sample of participants also considered them in terms of academic qualifications. Twenty-five interviewees carried doctoral qualifications and only four participants held a Masters degree or less. This again can be attributed to the posts they occupy

[3] Number of interviewees from a certain nationality

and their designation as university staff.

B. Government and Policy Level Participants

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the final stage of the research was carried out in the winter of 2013. The purpose of this stage was to get different stakeholders to shed light on a range of issues raised during the second stage. I was able to meet six Omani national policy- and decision-makers in different bodies in Oman, including: the Oman State Council (2 participants), the Supreme Council for Planning (1 participant), and the Ministry of Higher Education (3 Participants). I capitalized on my personal contacts and network to be able to meet the informants. I received substantial help from the Dean of my college, who established contact with two of these people for me.

5.10 Interviewing Process and Informed Consents

As indicated, I used a semi-structured set of questions (Silverman, 2013). I prepared a set of questions as a guide, containing the dimensions I felt should be covered, such as experiences, roles and concerns/difficulties. Questions were prepared in English, given that the medium of teaching in an Omani university is English, with the exception of subjects taught in Arabic in departments related to the Arabic language and religious studies. Lecturers are generally expected to be proficient and effective communicators in English at university level. Moreover, as the topic was transnational education, the assumption was that people involved would be communicating and teaching in English.

The challenge at this stage was to strike a balance between what I planned to cover, on the one hand, and what might interest participants, on the other, while also leaving room for unexpected issues to arise. This is why I decided to try out the questions before going to the field. Reasons for conducting pilot interviews range from enhancing the confidence of the researcher, to clarifying content, to deciding on the style of the questions asked (Bryman, 2008; Silverman, 2013).

As mentioned earlier, Stage 1 contributed to setting direction, included about seven interviews and therefore provided me with enough practice. So my reasons for carrying out a pilot study were related not so much to gaining confidence as to setting and clarifying the direction that

the main research was to take.

Given time constraints, I managed to try out the questions once, with a colleague in my college. This proved valuable by shifting my focus more towards avoiding questions that might be leading or could influence the opinions of participants. For example, a question such as: '*Would you describe your experience as positive or negative?'* was changed to: *'How did you find such experience?'* Table 13 shows the interview questions asked and how they can be mapped onto the research questions. However, research question no. 5, '*What are the implications of the current level of dependence on transnational partnerships on quality provision and on the educational development of the higher education sector in Oman and what issues does the case raise regarding policy borrowing?'* is dealt with through documentary analysis and data generated from Stage 2.

Research Question	**Questions used (Combination)**
1. What are the approaches adopted in each of the institutions? How do they vary? Why?	• Can you tell me about your experience with academic affiliations • In what way are you involved with them? • What was your role in the process?
2. What are the rationales behind transnational partnerships (at national and organization level)?	• What in your opinion are the rationales behind your organization pursuing international affiliation/partnership? • Why do you think international universities seek academic partnerships in Oman?
3. How do participants see transnational partnerships as contributing to quality?	• What do you think the institution hopes to get from these partnerships? • What do you think the institution is getting out of the partners? • What would you say they contribute to the work of the organization? In what areas? • What does a typical visit of a partner look like? • What kind of areas concern partners when it comes to maintaining quality?

	• What do you hope/try to gain from being involved in these programmes? What would you say they contribute to your own work?
4. How do participants perceive and experience transnational partnerships and their efficacy?	• How do you find the role of the partners in the organization? • What do you think the role of a partner should be? • What do you consider the tasks of a partner? • What do you perceive their role to be in terms of professional development? • What do you consider to be the characteristics of a good partnership? • How do you ensure standards are met? • How do you find the process of meeting standards? • Are there things you find (challenging, worrying, and difficult)? • What regulations guide the way you deal with your partners?

Table 12: Alignment of Research Questions with Interview Questions

The first ten interviews in the main research stage lasted between one hour and nearly two hours. At this initial stage, I didn't mind the duration of interviews, provided that the participants were happy to elaborate and share experiences. Moreover, I was trying to make sense of their experiences: for example, by finding out what issues they gravitated towards and why. Most importantly, I found their experiences to be fascinating and interesting. However, as the number of interviews increased, it became evident that little additional information was emerging. I therefore focused the interview more, as it was obvious that the information provided showed a great deal of commonality with previous interviews.

Challenges during the course of data collection varied. I faced four types of challenge: (1) participants changing their minds about their participation in the interviews, (2) participants not qualifying to participate, (3) recording issues, and (4) personal stress issues due to time

constraints.

Despite the initial willingness to participate, there were two cases (in University 1 and University 2) of candidates who, after meetings were agreed on and I arrived at their offices, apologized and stated that they had changed their minds. I fully respected their decision and thanked them for their honesty. I informed them that they were under no obligation to participate and that participation was voluntary. I withdrew with no questions asked. This loss was compensated by gatekeepers who provided alternative contacts.

In two other cases, interviews were cancelled because the interviewees' scope of experience was not sufficient to qualify them as relevant informants. This became apparent only when I talked to them on the day the interview was scheduled for, as they had not read the documents sent to them in advance. I thanked them for their willingness to participate and explained a bit of the nature of the research to help them understand why I could not proceed with the interviews.

Recording was an issue with two participants. In the consent form, participants were given the choice of being recorded. When filling out the form, two candidates decided that they didn't want their interviews to be recorded: one was in the Arabic language in University 1 and one was in English in University 2. Due to my competence in Arabic, I was capable of writing down most of the interview in Arabic word for word. However, with the second candidate I had to rely on note-taking. The Arabic transcript was translated into English. In respect of translation, a decision had to be made as to whether the aim should be literal translation or translation for meaning (Birbil, 2000). I decided it would be more useful to capture meaning (sample included in Annexure).

I also felt that recording was somewhat intimidating to participants in the first two interviews, so I took particular care to assure them of the confidentiality of data collected and the way the data would be dealt with, even before giving them the consent form. Another reason for explaining how I was going to handle the data was that I was using two audio recording devices rather than one to avoid losing interviews. I had faced the problem of losing one interview in Stage 1 due to technical failure of a device. Therefore, I decided to use a second device for backup. I found myself explaining this unfortunate experience to participants and asking their permission to use two devices. This proved helpful in getting them to cooperate and avoiding uneasiness about being recorded.

Another issue I faced was personal stress as a result of time constraints. When I first visited the institutions, I was under the impression that interviewees had already been located and informed, since communication had begun weeks earlier. However, I learned that this was not the case. Interviews were arranged only after my first meetings with the gatekeepers. Waiting for these first meetings caused some delay in the process, as interview arrangements only started afterwards.

As stated earlier, access to participants was sometimes secured through referral and snowball sampling. Nevertheless, the time between arrangements and meetings was sometimes not long enough. That is, in three cases, the participants identified for research were recommended by participants whom I had just finished interviewing. On these three occasions, participants would point out another person who they believed would be relevant and could contribute to the research. They were kind enough to arrange for meetings to be held immediately. Those three participants informed me that they had time for immediate meetings and asked me to come over. Obviously, they didn't have time to go through the documents sent and I had to leave extra time for them to do so. In all these cases, I had to brief them on the research and make sure they were happy to go ahead with the interviews. These unexpected changes put some pressure on me to be more time-conscious and avoid missing a subsequent meeting. Nevertheless, I found that briefing them and taking this extra time helped to break the ice and establish some rapport with participants.

A few interviews were interrupted by unexpected phone calls or students walking in. This was unavoidable as participants explained that they had to remain in their offices. Nevertheless, the longest interruption lasted for only about one minute, as participants would immediately apologize and request time to get back to the caller later for the sake of continuing the interview. I had to be extra conscientious about reminding interviewees of the topic of discussion before any interruptions took place, in order to maintain the flow of conversation. All in all, it is fair to say that interviews went well (except for the minor interruptions) and participants were pleasant and friendly.

The total number of visits to each university was 4-5. During these multiple visits, good rapport and networking were established with different people. I was given contacts and business cards and granted permission to contact the people concerned at later stages in case any further data should be needed.

5.11 Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is essentially about exploring, categorizing, explaining, defining, mapping and theorizing (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994).

Data analysis in qualitative research is a process that is cyclical, non-linear and iterative, and involves different activities. This is demonstrated through Miles and Huberman's (1994, p. 10) model of data analysis, which illustrates that the four main activities involved are: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. I found in the research methods literature sound guidance on how to approach analysis of the interview data.

Gibbs (2007, p. 1) directed me towards expecting transformation in the process of analysing data. As he puts it, *'The idea of analysis implies some kind of transformation. You start with some (often voluminous) collection of qualitative data and then process it, through analytic procedures, into a clear, understandable insightful, trustworthy and even original analysis'*. Cohen et al. (2011, p. 538) advised that analysis is guided by a principle of *fitness for purpose*, meaning that the form of data analysis is determined by what the researcher wants the data to do. They give examples of what researchers may set out to do, such as describe, portray, summarize, interpret, discover patterns, generate theme, explore, test, etc.

Ritchie and Spencer (1994) cautioned that the method of analysis has to be grounded and driven by people's original accounts, and to be dynamic and open to change/amendments throughout the analytic process. It should also enable easy retrieval of original textual material, and allow between- and within-case analysis. Finally, the analytical process should be accessible to others.

I followed Miles and Huberman's (1984) advice that researchers should start analysing as soon as the first data have been collected, and was further helped by Bazeley's (2013, p. xx) advice to '*Read and Reflect, Explore and Play, Code and Connect, Review and Refine to start the analytic process; Describe, Compare, and Relate to deepen it; then Extract and Explain, so that you can Contend, Defend, and Extend to bring it to conclusion*'.

I used the framework developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994) for an '*analytical process which involves a number of distinct though highly interconnected stages*' in which '*The approach involves a systematic process of shifting, charting and sorting material according*

to key issues and themes' (p. 177). Specifically, they argue that data analysis is made up of five key stages:

- **Familiarization:** gaining an overview of the richness of data, being familiar with the range and data gathered, by, for example, listening to tapes, studying observation notes and reading transcripts. This is especially the case when there is a range of participants involved

- **Creating a thematic framework**: identifying key issues, themes and concepts that allow the data to be examined. The researcher draws on research questions and objectives as well as matters raised by participants themselves, together with the experiences that recur in the data. The result of this stage is a detailed index labelling data into manageable chunks. This acts to set up a *thematic framework* within which material can be sorted. Some of the indexed categories may be virtually identical to specified areas of questioning, whereas others are newly defined from emergent themes.

- **Indexing**: refers to '*the process whereby the thematic framework or index is systematically applied to the data in its textual form*' (p. 180). Data are selected and annotated according to the thematic framework. Index references are recorded in the margins either descriptively or numerically. A single passage might include numerous themes, all to be referenced in order to allow a pattern to appear. This process is subjective and involves continuously making judgements and introducing refinements.

- **Charting**: shifting and charting data according to core themes. This stage is concerned with consolidating emergent categories, patterns and associations.

- **Mapping and interpretation**: going back to address key objectives of the research, requiring '*leaps of intuition and imagination*' (p. 186).

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim throughout the research stages. Walford (2001) suggests a ratio of 5 to 1, meaning five hours taken to transcribe one hour of interview. I found that I took longer than that, especially since the majority of interviews exceeded one hour of recording. I made use of verbatim transcribing to deliberately focus on individuals' responses

by providing quotes to substantiate particular points arising from the analysis (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 538).

The data analysis stage was challenging because I faced the problems that qualitative researchers typically have to deal with in terms of managing the amount of data I collected, making sense of it all, and deciding what parts to leave out (Merriam, 1998; Bryman, 2011), especially after transcribing.

Once I finished transcribing all the interviews, I found that using memos after finishing each script helped me to deal with early analysis while still staying attached to the data, progressively building up impressions and following a thread of findings as they unfolded. As Richards (2011, p. 76) puts it, '*The first meetings with the data are precious because this is when you are most able to be surprised by the research situation and everything about it. In the record of the early efforts, you notice things you didn't notice at the time and will later take for granted*'.

This early analysis includes recording similarities, differences, relationships, interesting comments and statements. It also includes notes and annotations in the margins to record the researcher's thinking at that time. The memos I used were not only about emerging ideas but also about the document as a whole, recorded on a paper attached on top or at the end of each script.

My familiarization with the data began as I went through the transcripts individually. I read them all carefully, together with the notes/memos attached.

The second stage, creating a thematic framework, started with initial grouping and categorizing by topic. I began thinking of a way to index, label, organize and classify the data. Gibbs (2007, p. 148) defines this process as follows: '*the action of identifying a passage of text in a document or an image or part of an image that exemplifies some idea or concept and then connecting it to a named code that represents that idea or concept … all the passages and images associated with a code can be examined together and patterns identified*'. The repetitive patterns of human actions will naturally lead to the same or similar codes appearing multiple times throughout the analysis. However, it is important to think of a pattern rather than just stable regularities. Codes representing patterns in terms of similar meanings or things in common are grouped into different categories.

Every time I read a section, I would open a document and assign a topic. I also had to use my judgement to evaluate the relevance of some of the chunks of data, as some seemed irrelevant.

The result was more than 25 different main topics in University 1. However, as I moved to Universities 2 and 3, I noticed that the topics became fewer in number (19 key topics in University 2 and 12 topics in University 3). One reason was that the interviews themselves had become more structured as they progressed and were therefore shorter than the interviews at University 1, which had exceeded 80 minutes. Moreover, it seemed that, perhaps unconsciously, my questions had become more direct and closely defined, as indicated earlier. This caused topics to be more structured and limited, as demonstrated in Table 14. The table also shows the common areas shared across all three institutions, both coloured and bold.

	Classification of Transcripts by Topic			
	University 1	University 2		University 3
	Concepts definition	**Definition**		**Definition**
	Agreement	Agreement		Agreement
	Assumptions	Assumptions		Assumptions
	Challenges	**Challenges**		**Challenges**
	Difficulties			
	Concerns	Risks		
	Affiliation Description	Affiliation Description		Affiliation Description
	Description of approaches	Description of approaches		Description of approaches
	Future of HE in relation to affiliation	Future of HE in relation to affiliation		Future of HE in relation to affiliation in Oman
	Opinions about approaches	**Opinions about approaches**		**Opinions about approaches**
	Rationales	**Rationales**		**Rationales**
	Qualities of a good partner	**Qualities of a good partner**		**Qualities of a good partner**
	Selecting a partner			Selecting a partner
		Successful partnership		

	Role of affiliate	**Role of affiliate**		**Role of affiliate**
	Typical Visit	**Typical Visit**		**Typical Visit**
	Advice on how to go about affiliation	Solutions		Solutions
	Yes, affiliation works	Affiliation is good		
	Metaphors			
	Expectations	**Expectations**		**Expectations**
		Franchising		
	MoHE role	MoHE & suggestions to it		
		OAAA		
	Examples of limitations of IAA			
	Possible model			
	What an affiliate is getting			
	What staff think org is getting			
	25 topics	19 topics		12 topics

Table 13: Classification of Transcripts by Topic

I ended up with much interesting data but still needed to narrow it down (Silverman, 2013). Bryman (2008) warns that inability to narrow down the data and the attempt to include everything will create a risk of the argument appearing too descriptive and lacking analytical depth. Therefore, the second step was to decide which topics to focus on. There was a need to condense and reduce topics while keeping in mind the main areas of interest in the research. I had to be selective, sometimes using my judgement regarding the extent to which a certain chunk of information was related to the research questions. Eventually I decided to aim to do justice to a smaller number of themes that were most relevant, rather than trying to include everything. To achieve my aim, I used the following criteria: research questions to keep me focused, and theory and literature to shape my thinking. These criteria proved equally helpful during the writing-up stage. Theory and debate, for example, around the area of policy borrowing framed the thesis theoretically and facilitated laying the foundations of the discussion. Another criterion I used to help with focusing and narrowing down is frequency.

Topics that showed greater frequency in terms of interviewees' interest received higher priority.

The key areas directly relevant to the research questions are the ones printed in bold, shown again below in Table 15. While these 9 key areas served the purpose of setting the thematic form and basis of analysis, many of the other common areas in Table 14 remained relevant and were significant in establishing connections and explanations.

1.	Definition
2.	Expectations and assumptions
3.	Challenges & concerns
4.	Description of approach experienced
5.	Role of affiliate
6.	Opinions about approaches experienced
7.	Rationales
8.	Typical visit
9.	Advice & solutions

Table 14: Common Categories in All Three Institutions

As mentioned earlier, the analytical process started with the creation of word documents, labelled by topic in order to identify a thematic framework. This indexing stage by itself marks the beginning of coding. A code is defined as '*a short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data*' (Saldaña, 2013, p. 3). Thus, each unit of data will be assigned an interpretive meaning in the form of a code. It is worth mentioning that coding can be subjective. The interpretive nature of coding explains why two people might differ about the choice of words or phrases. Factors such as a researcher's ontological and epistemological orientation, coding method, and conceptual and theoretical framework, also play a role in assigning meanings to data.

Each of these labelled documents was then individually subjected to in-depth analysis and coding, in order to identify the theme. Gibbs (2007, p. 152) defines a theme as '*a recurring issue or an idea or concept either derived from prior theory or from respondents' lived experience that emerges during the analysis of qualitative data. It can be used to establish a*

code with which text can be coded'. Table 16 provides an example of charting, showing how the theme of *Challenges and concerns facing HE in TNE* emerged. Themes appear after an iterative process of thinking that preferably should happen in stages or cycles, as advised by Saldaña (2013).

The first column shows the relevant passages from the transcripts, previously indexed in different transcripts as *challenges*, gathered from the transcripts of University 1, all in one document labelled 'challenges'. The second column shows the first cycle of coding, in which a word or a phrase is assigned to a portion of text. This portion could be a sentence, a paragraph or an entire page, the purpose being to summarize or summatively capture certain meanings. The third column shows the second cycle of coding, in which coding becomes more organized, condensing codes and meanings in an analytical manner and showing patterns. The journey of coding requires a researcher to be analytical and capable of moving beyond the descriptive level (Merriam, 1998; Richards, 2011).

A pattern could include different things such as similarities, differences, frequencies, sequence or causation. The fourth column shows the category that contributed to the overall theme of challenges. The fifth column of the table shows a sub-category that appeared in the analysis as an exception. I had to split the category after noticing variations with reference to whether academic challenges facing HE were caused locally or also by the partner.

This process of analysis, along with the research questions, led to identification of the following main themes:

- '*Affiliation*' and '*cooperation*'
- Rationales (those of local HEs and partners) behind pursuing affiliation
- Factors contributing to the success of partnership and qualities of a good partner
- Challenges and concerns facing HE in TNE

The findings of this study are presented in two chapters, showing the last stage of mapping and interpretation. The first findings chapter, Chapter 6, contains a summary of emerging themes presented in the form of tables. The reason for choosing a table format is to facilitate comparison and contrast across the three institutions. Presenting findings in tables serves to highlight not only the issues they have in common but also what each context prioritized in terms of different issues. Chapter 7 elaborates on the summary and includes more details, supported by quotes from informants. Other data are presented in the form of a model.

Analysis of the last stage of research is illustrated in Chapter 8, which presents the relevant views of stakeholders, at governmental policy making and decision levels.

5.12 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined and discussed the methodological underpinnings and the design of this study. The use of qualitative research method, semi-structured interviews and desk research has contributed to generating rich data from stakeholders, namely the staff of three Omani case institutions, policy and decision makers in higher education in Oman, specifically representatives from those bodies with responsibility for oversight of private higher education in Oman and for higher education policy. In addition, the measures taken to ensure proper access, sampling and recording are also clarified. What's more, I have discussed how the concept of trustworthiness applies to this qualitative research. Finally, the data analysis followed the steps detailed above.

Segments belonging to the document labeled: Challenges	Code in Cycle 1	Code in Cycle 2	Category	Comment
You know, though our first affiliation approach was really good, it had to stop. The reason is that the partners thought we were not ready to go to a higher level of qualification. They were thinking positively and they wanted us to wait longer to develop more, get more feedback from the community and that what was done was right, at least graduate two batches. However, the local management then thought it was an urgent need to move on and thought students may go somewhere else.	Conflict in perspectives Sound judgement Retention pressure	Management decision	Organization challenge	
Telling what I have to do in the classroom is easy. Instead of coming for a couple of days and telling me what to do, come yourself and teach for a while, see exactly what is going on, see the obstacles and then based on reality, in this particular environment and your experience, give us much more constructive advice. Don't base your judgements on your past experience that had nothing to do with my environment. We had the same advisors who gave the same unrealistic advice. I think that is what is missing because it could have saved a lot of effort.	Distant advice Irrelevant advice Unrealistic advice	Staff & academic support	Academic challenge	Partner relevance
My first and biggest concern is the quality of students we have, who are not very good. Student intake is not in our hands. What we get, we have to take. Because of this, the uniform pattern of one year foundation and then two years diploma or 4 years degree creates a problem. It suits intelligent students but not average or	Student quality/ intake & admission	Standards	Academic challenge	Local university relevance

below-average students. That is why many students are going under probation or failing their courses.	Programme structure Progression rate			
In international business, there is a term we use called 'self referencing criteria'. It means that you are trying to interpret others' culture based on yours. So everyone is trying to look at me from his own perspective, not being able to understand others' perspective. You tend to associate things with your nearest understanding and therefore apply the same behaviour to another culture. The result could be disastrous.	Being judgemental	Cultural sensitivity	Cultural challenge	
What is happening makes no sense. There are 3 categories of HEIs: university, university college and a college. Some are running the programmes of the affiliated universities. The degrees are even awarded by that partner university. Some universities have taken the programmes and contextualized and customized. Each country's requirements are different. That means programmes are different. However, all these programmes are administered to Omani students. It may not be identical, true and this is OK. But there has to be some kind of uniformity. Some basic things have to be the same. However, if they are learning different things, then this doesn't make sense at all.	Ambiguity Lack of consistency and uniformity	Regulation of HE sector & policy	National level challenge	

	Need for minimum standard			
You know, this is not the capital city. Service and big companies come from there so we have a big weakness related to geographical factors and also a threat when it comes to providing technical services and academic infrastructure.	Lack of resources	Being disadvantaged due to distance	Geographical challenge	

Table 15: Example Theme (Theme 4: Challenges and Concerns Facing HE in TNE)

Chapter 6: Presentation and Analysis of Data 1: The Staff Views

6.1 Introduction

As already explained, the focus of the research at the centre of this thesis was on exploring how TNHE activity, stimulated by a public policy that mandates PHEIs to partner with recognized international (i.e. non-Omani) universities, is experienced by a key group of stakeholders, namely the staff of three Omani case institutions. This chapter will present an analysis of the views of these staff members, as expressed in the course of the interviews that comprised Stage 2 of the data collection. It examines their experiences and perspectives and how they perceive their international academic partners.

As mentioned in Chapter 5 (Methodology), the empirical study at the centre of this research was carried out in three interrelated stages:

Stage 1, a pilot study conducted in Summer 2012, was covered in Chapter 5 (section 5.5).

Stage 2 was carried out in Spring 2013. Three different private universities in three different regions were selected as cases, and semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out to explore the phenomenon of TNHE in the different contexts. As the main stage of data collection, this phase addressed research questions 1 to 4. The objective was to explore how TNHE is experienced in each context, which will be referred to as (e.g.) *Case* (C) or *HEI* (C).

Interviewees were requested to share their affiliation experiences, perceptions and understandings of the rationales for seeking affiliation, how partners are perceived as contributors to quality, the challenges involved, and what they would regard as a successful affiliation. The purposive sample covered participants representing different levels in the institutions: Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Deans, Quality Assurance Heads/Directors, Departments' Directors/Heads, administrative staff and academics. The total number of interviews was 29 (Case 1=11), (Case 2=10) and (Case 3=8).

The following section presents the thematic issues that came to the fore in the interviews in all three universities. It also aims at comparing and contrasting the issues that emerged under the different themes. The analysis is presented in tables, each of which is supported with a narrative account of the most important issues that participants focused on in their particular cases.

Linked to the research questions, the four issues that emerged were:

1) *Affiliation* and its relationship to *cooperation* in the context of partnership
2) *Rationales* behind pursuing *affiliation*, for both the local PHEI and for its international partners
3) *Factors contributing* to the *efficacy and* success of partnership and the different responsibilities of a partner
4) *Challenges and concerns*.

Stage 3 was conducted in Winter 2013 and addressed the recommendation in my first Progression Board that the voices of other stakeholders in HE be included. The focus of Phase 3 was on obtaining views and comments of different stakeholders on different issues raised by participants during the second stage. It targeted six policy and decision-makers in different bodies in Oman, namely: the Oman State Council (2 participants), the Supreme Council for Planning (1 participant) and the Ministry of Higher Education (3 Participants). Findings from this stage will be presented in Chapter 7.

6.2 Emerging Themes

6.2.1 *Affiliation* and *Cooperation*

In order to identify the form and nature of the TNHE phenomenon as it is experienced in Oman (Ritchie and Spencer, 1994), the first research question in the Stage 2 interviews required interviewees to share their experiences of ***academic partnerships (including affiliations)*** as key to securing data that would help answer **RQ 1: What are the approaches experienced in each institution? How do these vary and why?**

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ***affiliate (to/with)*** as to '*officially attach or connect a subsidiary group or a person to an organization, officially join or become attached to an organization, a person or organization officially attached to a larger body'*. According to Knight (2005), in the context of higher education, the word 'affiliation' describes the case in which '*different types "public and private", "traditional and new" providers from various countries collaborate through innovative types of partnerships to establish networks/institutions to deliver courses and programmes in local and foreign countries through distance or face to face modes'*.

This definition implies that different types of collaboration are included under 'affiliation', including networking and a wide range of activities, such as teaching, learning, research,

exchange activities, projects, and community service activities. This is consistent with the definition of TNHE offered in Chapter 4, section 4.2 above, where TNHE is defined so as to include all types of HE study programmes and education services in another context than that of the place where the awarding institution is located.

Further, as stated in Chapter 2, section 2.6, the OAAA Quality Standard on Governance and Management includes *Institutional Affiliations for Programmes and Quality Assurance* as part of the first standard, Governance and Management. This suggests that affiliation could cover activities and not only programmes.

With that in mind, the terms 'affiliation' and 'affiliate' were used by the researcher to mean different activities that partnerships might cover. Consequently, the word 'affiliation' was the key word used in the questions. The expectation was that TNHE would *be evident* (as seen in Chapter 4) in the mobility of

1. People
2. Programmes/projects/services
3. Policy and practice.

Another dimension of partnership, provider mobility, is not within the scope of this research, as explained in Chapter 2.

Right from the first interview, which took place in C3, participants revealed different understandings, which required attentiveness and care on the part of the researcher. Later on, data analysis revealed even greater variations in understanding *affiliation* across all the three cases, especially in terms of what participants do or do not regard as *affiliation*, leading to the emergence of *cooperation* as an important linked concept in each case context. Furthermore, in C2, another concept, referred to as *franchising*, appeared as another stage in the development of partnerships.

Interestingly enough, while the word 'affiliation' is used differently, the word 'affiliate' was used in a less restricted manner to refer to a partner. Also of interest is the fact that most interviewees in the sample of 29 experienced more than one type of partnership, with a number of key dimensions emerging in terms of

a) Form/approach: how the relationship worked and what is/was being delivered

b) Mode of delivery: process including communication and delivery of what is involved in the scope of partnership
c) Scope: certificates, programmes, curriculum assessment and certification, research, services, projects, academic activities, non-academic activities, other activities
d) Partner contribution.

In all three cases, *affiliation* was perceived differently. Most importantly, it was not the only concept used to describe a relationship with a foreign partner. Instead, the concept of *cooperation* emerged as well.

A) Case 1

Interviewees in this PHEI had experience of fewer partners than interviewees in C2 and C3, though some of them had an average of 10 years' experience of relationships with partners. They drew a clear distinction between *affiliation* and *cooperation*. Again, the word 'affiliate' was used without reservation to refer to a partner generally, regardless of the stage of the connection.

Unlike use of the word *affiliation* to define and describe a stage with certain characteristics, the word 'affiliate' was used freely to refer to a partner in general. Table 17 shows the differences between *affiliation* and *cooperation* in this case context:

Affiliation	**Collaboration/Cooperation**
1. Considered as stage one in a university's development	Considered as stage two in a university's development
2. Implies lack of experience and need for guidance and support	Implies a university's maturity and independence
3. Power, control and authority lie with the partner	Power, control and authority lie with the local HEI
4. One-way communication	Two-way communication
5. Partner tells, imposes, checks and monitors	Partner advises, consults
6. High level of authority and control from a partner	Relationship is less authoritative and more collegial
7. Affiliation is limited to programme mobility, specifically in franchised programmes (importing ready-made	Collaboration covers projects and services such as consultancy

	programmes) and could include people mobility in the form of partner's staff secondment	

Table 16: Difference between *Affiliation* and *Cooperation*

Participants drew a clear distinction between *affiliation* and *cooperation*, clarifying that they refer to two different things, as shown for example in this comment:

'*Over the years so far, I witnessed all types of cooperation including affiliation. We have had two types of affiliations. Well, no … one of them is actually affiliation. The other one is not affiliation, it is like cooperation. Cooperation is different, you know*.' (C1.8)

'Now that our university has stood on its feet and has matured, the options we have are either to continue with our existing partners, look for alternatives.' (C1.11)

The word *affiliation* is used to deliberately define and describe an institution at a certain stage and with certain characteristics, as described in Table 17. *Affiliation* appears to be associated with the HEI being underdeveloped and in need of assistance from another developed and recognized party:

'*Affiliation in my view is a close collaboration between two institutions whereby one institution has a large experience in imparting education in HE and the other institution is young, new and needs to benefit from that experience.'* (C1.7)

Unlike affiliation, *cooperation* is regarded as less authoritative and as giving more power to the local HEI, which is now perceived as an experienced and developed organization. Consultation is considered a form of cooperation:

'A few years back, the affiliation changed and turned into cooperation, advisory role, so they are not responsible anymore for coming and managing. They disconnected their names from the university and their experience is now provided in the form of consultancy. So the capacity is less and depends on our demands. That means they have less power and control and we have more, based on what? On the experience we gained from them in the past years.' (C1.5)

Cooperation is considered better than *affiliation* because it allows a selective approach, with more power to control choices of a partner, by contrast with *affiliation*, which is considered to comprise both the relatively (imposed) good and bad of a partner:

'I think a selective programme approach is better than a comprehensive approach because no single university will be perfect in everything. I have to take what is good and I don't want to commit myself to taking other things as well. This is what you are good at and I want that only.' (C1.10)

B) Case 2

Affiliation in C2 is perceived as a second stage preceded by a more basic form of dealing with a foreign partner, called *franchise*, in which a partner's programme is imported and taught, as seen in Table 18.

Nevertheless, a similar distinction is drawn in C2 where there is a transition in the degree of power and authority of a growing local HEI as a relationship moves towards *cooperation*. The following participants describe this transition as follows:

'The involvement of the affiliates was detailed but over time, it became less rigorous ... we became a mature institution. Now I can see it is a peer relationship with our university…. it is more informal now.' (C2.6)

Franchising	**Affiliation**	**Cooperation**
Considered as stage one in HEI development	Considered as stage two in HEI development	Considered as stage three in HEI development
Perceived as suitable for setting up and running new HEIs	Perceived as suitable for HEIs that have some experience with partnerships	Perceived as suitable for mature HEIs
Seen in **programme importing**: Focus is on products in the form of issuing a certificate or importing a programme	Seen mainly in **programmes, activities** and **services**: Scope could cover areas such as: • Teaching, learning activities	Seen mainly in **services** and projects: Research oriented Takes the form of collaboration on projects

	• QA policies and procedures, Staff exchange	
Takes the form of importing ready-made solutions, e.g. programmes, material, certificate Includes secondment of staff	There is some adaptation and customizing of imported programmes	Emphasis is on local expertise to develop policies and/or programmes
Power usually lies substantially with partner Relationship tends to be formal	Power and authority lies more with the affiliate	Power and control are more with the local HEI than with the partner
There could be a continuum in the relationship that can range between: A) Complete/full franchising: close monitoring, hands-on approach, high level of intervention, authority and control from a partner B) Semi-franchising: hands-on approach but with contribution from local management C) Passive silent partner with no intervention	Relationship could move within a continuum from formal to less formal: A) Formal assessment/evaluation B) Less thorough and less formal as it turns into routine Moderate, situational intervention	Relationship is less formal, leans towards more personal relationships Intervention is requested and only allowed by local HE
Partner demands and/or commands	Partner supports and guides	Partner advises

Table 17: The Perceived Differences between the Three Concepts: *Franchise*, *Affiliation* and *Cooperation*

The understanding in this case context is that a university moves on a continuum. It usually starts by *franchising*, with the partner's ready-made curriculum and programme being imported and taught in the local PHE. Such a beginning allows the latter to focus on setting systems and infrastructure in place, and then to move towards *cooperation* as a sign of development and maturity:

'Our future direction is cooperation because when we started, we had a lot of hands-on approach from (X university) but now we are more mature university and we have the experience, we have good staff, very high standards, we have professors, systems in place, we have learned from others…. Having said that, we might go back to a strong affiliation when we establish a new entity and walk ourselves away from it as we develop experience.' (C2.7)

The above quote suggests that in this context, *affiliation* is a transition period, being the second of three stages, in which the HEI has achieved some progress in its development and has added services in addition to dealing with the importation of programmes. However, as knowledge of the new practice/programme grows stronger, there is a tendency to move away towards *cooperation*.

This conclusion is supported by the comments of two senior people in this organization who, from their experience of running affiliations, have contributed to the addition of another layer in this distinction, whereby an approach called *franchising* is considered a lower and basic but different form of *affiliation* (Table 18). It was associated with ultimate power being in the hands of the partner. Interviewees were not in favor of *franchising*, since it was perceived as less beneficial.

'No, franchising is a different word, different thing. What we had been doing in (X College) was close to franchising but it is not complete franchising because we were doing our own things like recruiting and managing. Why should somebody do franchising if he has got capability and experience except if they are trying to gain from the reputation of the franchise.'

'If we were a franchiser of (Our affiliates), we would be offering their degrees here, that we would be a branch of them effectively. That's not what we do. We are very careful not to do that because we are independent and autonomous. We make our own decisions…. You have to be careful of any institution that says: we can deliver our degree in your location.'

Research is considered a key distinction of a mature university:

'We have gone through the initial phase of developing a university. Now we have to look at things a grown-up university has to do. Research is on our list.' (C2.3)

'Last year, the contract changed. They said that we grew enough to just work separately…. Now we can proceed by ourselves and we hope to cooperate on the research level.' (C2.5)

Here, by contrast with the previous context, while *affiliation* is also regarded as a stage, it comes second in organizational development. However, it is observed that Stages 1 and 2 share similar features with those that C1 classifies under *affiliation* (e.g. Partner power and Authority).

C) Case 3

It was interesting to notice that despite the use of the same word, *cooperation*, it seemed to carry a different meaning in C3 as Table 19 shows. Unlike in C1 and C2, *cooperation* was viewed in C3 as a model rather than a stage of development. Significantly, the model was associated with a disconnection from commercial *affiliation* and represented 'Nonprofit' education, as will be explained further.

While C3 still shared a few characteristics with C1 and C2, there remained fundamental differences. That is, while *cooperation* still implied maturity, autonomy and authority for local HE, it nevertheless placed the concept of the 'win-win situation' as a core guiding value, within which benefits are perceived as mutual and based on friendship and strong relationships rather than financial gain. There was a firm belief that the local university was impacting on others as well, rather than being mainly a receiver of benefits from others. This suggests that for C1 and C2, *cooperation* could carry a higher risk of a win-lose relationship.

In contrast, the evidence from interviewees indicated that C3 rejected *affiliation* in any form and meaning presented above, because it was associated with a 'win-lose situation' whereby local HE would be in a position to lose resources without achieving any real benefits in terms of knowledge transfer.

Affiliation	**Cooperation**
1. Considered a 'Not–for-Profit' model	Considered a 'Nonprofit' model
2. Represents a 'win-lose ' situation	Represents a 'win-win' situation
3. Perceived negatively because relationship is unbalanced, based on obedience, financial gain and lack of benefits for local HE	Perceived positively because relationship is balanced, based on equivalence, strong relationships and friendship
4. Implies dependence on others and lack of experience	Implies a university's maturity, confidence and independence

5. Partner could impose unneeded and unwanted features	Cooperation seeks sharing of best practices depending on an identified need
6. Affiliation is perceived as less selective of right partners, through being driven by need for promotion and reputation of partner	Cooperation is perceived as highly selective of partners and task-focused
7. Ranking is essential in identifying partners	While ranking is important, it is not necessarily a driving criterion
8. Internationalization is not important	It incorporates internationalization as an important dimension

Table 18: Perceived Meaning of *Affiliation* and *Cooperation*

Thus, unlike cases C1 and C2, this organization stresses *cooperation* and rejects *affiliation* in any of the meanings known above:

'Affiliation is a myth. It is not a true thing. Unless affiliation is a branch of that university, it is nothing. I mean if it is just synchronization of names and labels, it won't work. So I feel with regard to this issue, I don't think there is a great benefit to Oman.' (C3.4)

While *affiliation* is perceived as suitable for a newly established HEI, it seems to come with identity problems:

'I think affiliation in the form of paying money and getting programmes or any other form is good in the process of forming when a university has no experience. It is good to rely on another partner to get guidelines, but a good institution will develop its own style with time. Education is about identity, Omani identity and culture. What will happen to those poor students if every institution has a foreign partner? We will end up with many styles and this is not healthy. We need to develop our own Omani style.' (C3.3)

Unlike the above cases, which consider *affiliation* as **a stage** in an organization's journey of development, this organization perceives it as **a model**. Interestingly enough, it seems to be a conscious decision made from the inception and planning stage of the development of this PHEI. Most importantly, it appears to represent a philosophy and guiding set of values, as explained below:

'The tendency was that all these institutions must be commercially affiliated to foreign HEIs and that model, really we didn't like it … we felt it will not work effectively and it will impact the progress of any system to be linked to another body … we are a private non-government but also non-profit whereas all the others are private non-government institutions, colleges at diploma level or bachelor level listed as companies for profit … we are non-government for the society, by the society and for the well being of the society. This distinction is very important because the philosophy, the mechanism naturally and the programmes will be affected.' (C3.4)

'It was the decision of the university right from the beginning of its establishment. A committee has been formed from Academics, very known ones, politicians, ministers, and they all have this impression that why we have to be followers? Why don't we have our own identity? And so it came from the planning stage of the university. Then came the strategy of the university and so on.' (C3.2)

It is interesting to note that despite the use of the same word, 'cooperation', it seems to carry a slightly different meaning in the sense that it places a high value on sharing best practices in a mutual, two-way direction, along with a strong belief that the local university is impacting on others as well.

'*We developed our relationship with the (X university). It is not affiliation but academic cooperation … in this model, we are open to best practice from around the world. We feel we can share practice, get the right help and we can help too. We receive and they receive too so it is a mutual academic cooperation.'* (C3.4)

Despite the consensus that exists among interviewees in C3 when it comes to beliefs and values surrounding *affiliation*, there is some variation in perceptions. For example, one interviewee believes that activities in the university are not forms of partnership at all, but forms of 'internationalization':

'We don't have any partnerships with any university. We have a few Memorandums of Understandings (MoUs) that cover student exchange, staff exchange, research, sometimes joint research projects. I think that is the only form of what you call "internationalization".'
(C3.2)

To conclude, the above analysis reveals different understandings of *affiliation* across the different institutions and even within the same organization. In the first two cases, there appears to be a tendency to move away from meanings of restricted power and authority (*affiliation*)

towards meanings of greater autonomy (*cooperation*), while importing best practice from the 'developed' institution. However, the third case tends to embrace meanings related to mutual sharing of best practice rather than importation of it.

Significantly, this suggests that meanings can be shaped by the institutions themselves, as in the third case. Moreover, meanings could be shaped by what the organization believes it stands for. For example, C3 used cooperation in the form of multiple Memoranda of Understanding (MOU) as a mechanism for achieving an international reputation by initiating different projects with international partners, fulfilling its own mission and vision and at the same time advancing itself towards internationalization. However, C1 and C2 used *affiliation* to obtain help from another international party during the first stages of initiation and thus to assure quality in terms of process and procedure.

6.2.2 Rationales

Question two aimed to find out more about the rationales behind the involvement of both PHEIs and international partners in TNHE (cross-border education), as seen in **the three Cases, with reference to RQ 2: What are the rationales behind transnational partnership (at national and organizational level)?**

Two contrasting sets of rationales were explored in terms of the experience and perception of the interviewees: those that they attributed to the international partner on the one hand and those that they attributed to their own institutions on the other. At this point it is worth mentioning that these rationales, as reported by the participants, were further categorized in light of the TNHE literature and rationales mentioned in Chapter 4.

Reported Rationales	**Category**	**C1**	**C2**	**C3**
1. Financial profit	Generating revenue	✓	✓	✓
2. To comply with and fulfil their own mission and vision statements that aim at internationalization	Internationalization of education	✓	✓	✓
3. Pursuing different and original areas for research		✓	✓	✓
4. Sharing experience and giving service to the region	Capacity building	✓	✓	✓

5. Help others develop education and capacity		✓	✓	✓
6. Desire to expand and gain international reputation	Global competitiveness	✓	✓	✓
7. Desire to promote certain educational models		✓		
8. To attract students to seek further education in their own campuses		✓	✓	✓
9. To gain access to an Arab country to learn Arabic, experience different culture	Promote cultural understanding	✓	✓	✓
10. Curiosity and wish to explore other parts of the world	Others	✓	✓	✓

Table 19: Rationales behind International Affiliates' Pursuit of International Affiliation

As can be seen in Table 20, interviewees report many rationales. These rationales can be seen as combinations of revenue seeking, involvement in internationalization of education, contributing to other countries' capacity building, seeking opportunities in a competitive market, and desire to promote and deepen cultural understanding.

However, unlike the evident consensus seen in Table 20, when interviewees are asked about the possible reasons why their institutions seek affiliation, an overall impression given by Table 21 is of discrepancies between the views of the cases. Yet, they seem to agree on the need to meet MoHE regulations and also on the need to receive guidance and support from a foreign partner.

	Category	**C1**	**C2**	**C3**
1. To meet standards and regulations of MoHE	QA (Compliance)	✓	✓	✓
2. To have a second international party that ensures quality of educational provision	QA	✓	✓	
3. Expectation that it will produce **students** with the same or similar quality as students graduating in the partner's university	QA (Comparability)	✓	✓	

4. Expectations that the quality of students' **experience** is comparable to students' experience in partner's university	QA (Comparability)		✓	
5. To establish and/or review quality assurance processes	QA	✓	✓	✓
6. For benchmarking purposes	Quality Improvement (Benchmarking)		✓	✓
7. To get help and support during early establishment of HEI	Capacity Building	✓	✓	
8. To get advice, consultation and guidance at different stages of HEI's development	Capacity Building	✓	✓	✓
9. To expand and diversify knowledge	Capacity Building	✓	✓	✓
10. To enable cooperation with other international HEIs on certain projects, mainly research	Capacity Building	✓	✓	✓
11. To shorten learning cycle/experience and get best practices from international partners	Capacity Building	✓	✓	✓
12. To be attached to a university that has international status and ranking (reputation and promotion)	Promotion	✓	✓	
13. For reasons related to student attraction and market competition, increasing profit	Generating Revenue	✓	✓	
14. To fulfil mission and vision with a link to internationalization	Internationalization			✓
15. To take a step towards internationalization, gain international reputation and develop international relationships	Internationalization			✓
16. To serve and expedite Omanization	Omanization	✓	✓	✓
17. To gain community and customer trust in operation and/or provision	Credibility/Trust	✓	✓	
18. Don't know/not sure	_	✓	✓	✓

Table 20: Rationales behind Local Omani Universities' Pursuit of International Partnership

Generally speaking, interviewees in C1 and C2 seemed to be closer in their opinions, while C3 participants show a greater degree of deviation from the other two cases. This discrepancy can

probably be traced back to the meanings associated with each type and also to the type of relationship (approaches) followed in each organization, as will be explained.

Moreover, analysis reveals that while interviewees cite many rationales in Tables 21. However, they seem to place strong emphasis on specific ones. In the following sections, I will explore the key rationales in each case in order to help clarify the link between these key rationales and the interviewees' own experiences in relation to their particular contexts.

A) Case 1

As shown in Table 20, interviewees in Case 1 gave many reasons that can be viewed in terms of monetary and non-monetary rationales. The key rationales that receive strong emphasis were the affiliates' desire to generate profit in the education industry, build their own profile, and spread a certain educational model, whether American, Australian or British. Moreover, participants believed that the affiliates might be driven by curiosity to explore other places or just by the desire to serve the region.

'*Education has become an industry, so knowingly or unknowingly, this profit motive is there. Technically, they call it surplus. What is it ultimately? Profit. And this is why universities worldwide want to expand their horizons.'* (C1.10)

'Each one is looking at something out of the collaboration. Our first affiliates were trying to find affiliation in the area here and sell their services. The second partner already had partners in the area and they were proud of the American system they were following and wanted to spread it.' (C1.2)

'*They might enter the relationship and say we want to see how institutions in the Middle East are working. What kind of people are there, what kind of culture is there, how an educational model can be done for them. For them, this part of the world is a research area where ... as we say in business, you try to do adaptation of your product. Well, also maybe them getting the experience of running a new university which will be an added advantage to their profile.'* (C1.7)

'*The affiliate is sharing experience and giving service to the region, to young universities. This will reflect on them in terms of reputation. It is give and share and collaborate. I don't think they are in need of the amount we pay.'* (C1.8)

That being said, it is notable that, regardless of the rationale, interviewees expressed the belief that these rationales seem to serve the affiliate more than they serve the local partner and that they are underpinned by the affiliate's desire to add value and advantage to themselves, even when the value, on the face of it, appears to consist of sharing experience or giving service to others.

As to why local HEIs would seek international affiliation, all participants asserted that the most fundamental reason was to meet the mandatory requirements of the MoHE. Other key rationales were:

- The expectation that it will produce students of the same or similar quality as students graduating in the partner's university
- To get help and support during the early stage of the HEI's establishment
- To get an experienced partner who can point out gaps and explicitly suggest how to fill them
- Shorten the learning cycle/experience and obtain best practices from international partners
- To be attached to a university of international status and ranking (reputation and promotion)

'*You know that we are private higher education institution. As per MoHE rules and regulations, we have to affiliate with another well recognized foreign institution.'* (C1.10)

'There was the belief that the partners will give us the quality education that they had in their country. That is why this elite university was selected to bring these elite ideas with the hope of moving people into good standards.' (C1.9)

'*The affiliates were supposed to apply the same standards and conditions they had in their own university so when a student graduates, he is as good as their own students and could continue his further studies in the foreign university.'* (C1.1)

'From my experience, any young university needs to do affiliation with a very mature university during the initiation period. For us, there was a need to build everything from scratch: building programmes, policies, procedures, catalogues … I mean everything. So you need them to come tell you and show you what is missing.' (C1.8)

'When I am making use of an affiliate, I am compressing time, I am gaining time, I am shortening time for my development. Instead of taking 100 years to discover on my own what should discover, bring another experienced institution to shorten time span for me and so I am able to take off much quicker.' (C1.6)

'International universities have rankings now, so you link your organization to other, well-known and well-recognized institutions in terms of reputation and quality. That is very important.' (C1.11)

Nevertheless, more than half the participants expressed concerns here that many universities, including theirs, seem to be driven by promotional rationales, which in their opinion are likely to present the risk of being taken advantage of without gaining real benefits.

'If you just seek affiliation to market yourself, in my opinion, it will not work. Having the affiliate's flag on my building or having another name appearing next to mine on the certificate will not do any good for Omani HEIs. Actually, it will work in a different way. You know how? I will pay for the affiliation. It engages me in something costly but I am not given really good experience because I am not learning and I didn't even ask for what I am being given. Why? Because I didn't have clear objectives to begin with, naturally, I didn't win anything. This could cause frustration, you know.' (C1.5)

B) Case 2

The m**a**jority of interviewees in C2 emphasized partners' rationales being related to revenue generation and not necessarily to curiosity or the wish to explore other parts of the world, as was suggested in C1. Moreover, they don't see them as trying to promote their educational model. However, many stressed that the affiliates have various motives beyond financial gain, for example to fulfil conditions related to internationalization and also to motivate students to travel overseas and study in their own campuses, as comprehensively put by the following informant:

'Different partners would come for different reasons; some may look only at the financial return, some will look at building long-term research building capabilities. Some have international agenda and make their presence known. Some want to play a role in developing human working force in different countries to help them diversify their income. Some come because they have a mission to internationalize their universities by having those partnerships.

They hope to attract more students to go to their countries. Different universities have different missions.' (C2.7)

As with the rationales in Omani PHEIs, there are many similarities between PHE1 and PHE2 when it comes to the rationales mentioned, as illustrated in Table 21.

'Academic affiliations are required by the MoHE for every and each faculty, college and university in Oman. This is, I think, with the objective to assure that the HE services provision in Oman will be up to international standards and the affiliation should be with a recognized international university. It is not a voluntary job for colleges and universities in Oman. NO, it should be there. This is why we have an international affiliation with a university that comes, I think, as 21st in the world, classification of research institution.' (C2.6)

This institution seems to place a heavy emphasis on credibility as a rationale for pursuing affiliation. Certificate recognition is important, with credibility being explained as:

'(being) *tested by the market really and … credibility is the reason why a student would want to come to this university. There is plenty of choice out there but a student would want a certificate that they think the world would understand, that would attach meaning to. That is what I mean by credibility, making that certificate worth having.'* (C2.3)

Unlike interviewees in C1, those in case C2 indicated that their PHEI seems to stress the use of its affiliation for benchmarking purposes as well:

'They give us advice. Affiliation is a benchmark for our university. The reports are very constructive. They help us plan better for where to develop.' (C2.6)

Some interviewees in C2 share with C1 the rationale that affiliation is expected to produce **students** of the same or similar quality as students graduating in the partner's university, as explained in Case 1.

Interestingly, there was also interview evidence to indicate that a broader view can be taken of the student dimension, going beyond questions of attainment to questions of experience. A senior participant established comparisons between institutions based on the students' experience rather than on the students themselves. With this emphasis, the aim is that the quality of students' **experience** should be comparable to that in the partner's university:

'I think that the processes which were in place gave the partner university a reassurance that the sort of student experience happening in the College is comparable to what is happening there, that we taught the same thing, assessment is within the international benchmarking.'
The above is supported similarly by another participant who believes that it is difficult to match qualities of students themselves:

'I think it would be very difficult to show that a degree from one institution exactly matches the quality of another institution ***because quality is a very difficult concept to grasp****. I think we have to be honest and say the degree from (this university) meets the quality assurance processes of the partner's university. That will apply from the design of the course outline to the examination of the courses. All those processes are approved by the partner before they would put their stamp on our certificates. So that is what is being ensured in this affiliation.'* (C2.3)

Finally, another noticeable difference is that some participants were not sure why their own organization was seeking affiliation. This suggests questions about the extent to which affiliation is communicated and openly discussed throughout the organization, and about whether affiliations are reviewed in a collaborative manner.

C) Case 3

In a similar manner, interviewees in C3 have touched on the rationales reported in the other case contexts, such as complying with MoHE regulations, reviewing quality assurance processes, building capacity through transferring knowledge, and obtaining advice. However, when it came to reporting affiliates' rationales for pursuing TNHE, interviewees prioritized those related to partners' desire to help other countries build capacity and to promote cultural understanding, by contrast with the rationales suggested by C1 and C2 interviewees, who identified monetary motives as the key drivers. Seven out of eight informants believed that international partners are interested mainly in giving a service, serving humanity and seeking opportunities for learning. Amongst several similar statements, the following captures this point:

'It is not a matter of them making money out of us or us making money out of them. It is a real academic cooperation. Yes, there will be some cost for some faculty or services from there to come but that is different from focusing on how much money did you make or give me this or give me that. They serve humanity. It is a service provided to those who need it so the benefit they get is not necessarily financial but rather fulfilling their mission and objectives.' (C3.4)

Further emphasis on cultural aspects of TNHE is reported by the following interviewee:

'We can help them study Arabic if they are interested, do research for example on Omani dialects. This is untouched field. There are many topics to be studied. Also there is the Omani culture and history to get to know.' (C3.6)

As with rationales behind local HEIs seeking international collaboration, this context shows a considerable difference in direction from that of C1 and C2, as there seems to be high awareness and interest in taking part in internationalization and global movement. Such an interest is explicitly reflected in the HEI's mission and vision.

'*One of the objectives of the university is to have what you call internationalization in which the university mission and vision is looking at this important factor, for the university to be recognized at national, regional and international level. This will also enhance student learning and faculty development*.' (C3.2)

In addition, the interviews indicated that this PHEI is motivated by the wish to establish international relationships and gain recognition rather than to simply acquire a certificate or accreditation:

'It is about a relationship. It is not about a certificate or accreditation. With the other models this is the problem. They want to impose their own standards on you. Standards might be good or not good but they limit you.' (C3.4)

'They contribute to the name of our university, international publication and patents, international recognition in different parts of the world.' (C3.2)

In this Case, priority seems to be given to research, and not necessarily to teaching and learning. 100% of informants highlighted the strong involvement of staff in research. The international partner's contribution is acknowledged in the sphere of research:

'*I am leaving to Madrid soon and my aim is to enhance my relationship with researchers and create opportunities for my research.'* (C3.6)

'Our university is a research university where we focus on research. We have also used a lot of benchmarking. Every year we have a team that comes and conducts external assessment on

our programmes to ensure that the programmes are constantly going through reviews. I think the biggest benefit is the sharing of information, the sharing of best practice and experience.' (C3.1)

Omanization is another motive for this PHEI to seek academic partnerships:

'Qualifying Omanis, upgrading their levels and increasing Omanization are very strong motives for us to seek strong relationships with others.' (C3.5)

It appears that C3 has a stronger orientation towards transnational higher education and embraces the global movement. This is seen not only in explicit statements in their mission and vision but also in terms of how they perceive themselves. Their involvement in internationalization is demonstrated in their focus on research (probably more than on teaching and learning, unlike C1 and C2), and in exchanging knowledge with others. There is also more attention to the cultural dimension and a noticeable focus on activities related to the establishment of relationships with international higher education institutions.

6.2.3 Efficacy and Success

The third theme consists of factors contributing to the success of affiliation and the qualities of good partners. In principle, affiliation is perceived positively due to its expected benefits, as mentioned earlier. Nonetheless, each university seems to have its own interpretation of what makes a successful affiliation.

TNHE is expected to achieve different objectives, as seen in Theme 2, *Rationales*. Therefore, **RQ 3: How do participants perceive and experience transnational partnership and their efficacy** aimed to ascertain opinions about the usefulness of having international partners and the extent to which they meet expectations. Interview questions covered the roles of partners, what is perceived as a successful partnership, or what is a good partner.

While Table 22 shows similarities across the three cases regarding factors contributing to the success of a partnership, interviewees in each case differed in what they emphasized as more important among these factors. For example, participants in C1 emphasized clarity of purpose of the affiliation and pursuing it for the right reasons, whereas participants in C2 viewed the partnership's ability to meet the right needs of an organization to be the most important factor. For C3, the success of cooperation depended on the extent to which the local PHEI would be capable of developing and strengthening relationships and individual friendships to maintain the stability and sustainability of cooperation.

		C1	C2	C3
	1. Clarity of purpose of affiliation/cooperation	✓	✓	✓
	2. Pursuing affiliation/cooperation for the right reasons	✓	✓	✓
	3. Its ability to meet real needs and produce tangible results	✓	✓	✓
	4. The ability of local universities to manage their partners	✓	✓	✓
	5. Suitability of partners and their services for the local context	✓	✓	✓
	6. Availability of 'ground workers' who are knowledgeable, efficient and committed, especially in the partner institution			✓
	7. Personal relationships and friendships	✓	✓	✓
	8. Partner's decision-making process not obstructed by high levels of bureaucracy			✓

Table 21: Factors Contributing to Success of Transnational Partnership

As for the qualities of a good partner, interviewees in all three organizations agreed that ranking, reputation and availability of a partner who can provide the 'latest knowledge' were very important. They also valued a partner who understood the uniqueness of the local PHEI in terms of context and culture and could deal with them accordingly. A good partner was also expected to share resources and provide necessary support.

Interviewees in C1 and C2 valued an attentive partner who would listen to stakeholders and tailor solutions accordingly, rather than presenting ready-made solutions that might not fit the context.

C1 and C3 participants highlighted the importance of having a partner who shares the local HEI's mission and vision, to ensure alignment in intentions and direction.

The following sections are going to explore the situation and report interviewees' opinions within their specific contexts.

A) Case 1

In this PHEI, while interviewees touched on different factors, they prioritized four of them as contributing to the success of affiliation:

a) Clarity of purpose of affiliation
b) Its ability to meet real needs and produce tangible results
c) The ability of local universities to manage their partners
d) Suitability of affiliation and its services to the local context.

Interviewees showed awareness of the 'commodification' of education and the likelihood of its impacting negatively on local Omani education should affiliates attempt to 'sell' unneeded products to Omani institutions. Three interviewees believed that institutions need to put effort into identifying purposes and needs. One expressed it thus:

'Start with a simple question: do I need affiliation in the first place or not? Why and in what area. This is clearly a strategic question that should be answered before going into any relationship. If you know why you need IIA? Then yes go ahead. Do I need affiliation to know how to design programmes? How to do research? How to serve the community? Do you need one? Do you need help with all? Fine, decide and know the ***what.*** *Then focus and concentrate on how to get it. I think this will make your experience more successful.'* (C1.5)

Participant 1 looks at broader areas related to the purpose of education. He asserts that useful affiliation, in order to be considered good value for money, should be measured by the degree to which it helps universities transform students' learning and extends the impact to society as a whole.

'Decision-makers and organizations need to know how to use it effectively to make a difference to individuals, society and the nation as a whole. As long as it doesn't help me transform behaviours, attitudes and thinking, then I believe it is useless. This explains why the majority of agreements, including ours, serve only the affiliates with all the money paid to them but not necessarily the local HEIs. Affiliation success starts with us.' (C1.1)

Whilst this interviewee believes that 'success starts with us', to indicate the responsibility of universities and decision-makers, there seems to be major conflict between views when it comes to answering the question: whose responsibility is it to identify needs and gaps? The

majority of participants believe that it is the responsibility of the affiliate to do so and expect them to have certain characteristics because they are perceived as more knowledgeable:
'I can't tell the partner everything. They must come, spend time with me here because … well, I may not be able to understand my needs and when I turn to my partners, they should be able to help me.' (C1.8)

The belief that partners are knowledgeable can be linked back to the rationales mentioned above for involvement in transnational affiliation. That being said, some participants expressed concerns about HEIs in Oman in general when it comes to their ability to manage a partner. The main reasons for their concern were related to lack of experience in this field, fitness of purpose, and guidance at national level, as will be illustrated later.

'The ability of HEIs to identify what they really need from a partner and the help they can get from them is not fully developed, in my opinion, because that requires experience, support and planning.' (C1.7)

Despite disagreement over whose responsibility it is to identify needs, interviewees agreed that any programme should meet different needs in the local context. Participants agree on the need to adapt, customize and tailor whatever the partner offers to suit local needs, if the partnership is to be successful:

'To take everything, say for example, from Europe or the West and bring it here to one of the third world countries, well, it doesn't work. You have to customize according to your needs, culture, industry and ambitions.' (C1.11)

However, while participant 10 admits that it is a challenge to contextualize, especially when there are multiple programmes coming from different places, he sees the challenge in a national context and asks how it works when applying national requirements:

'The challenge of having many partners would definitely be contextualizing because if I am having three different institutions, they will have programmes developed for their own students, their own countries and carry their own standards. So how and what contextualization would be in terms of Omani requirements? Also, how is the role of MoHE going to be?'

Likewise, another participant focuses on the national level and attributes struggles to lack of clarity when it comes to objectives that help to guide customizing:

'The key success factor, I'd say is tailoring and customizing. But this is also the main challenge. Ground reality is not clear or vividly present. By reality I mean social objectives, economic objectives and educational objectives that the programme existed to achieve. I have to know exactly what I need, based on my raw material, which is the students, their background and their abilities.' (C1.5)

By contrast, another participant sees local development of programmes as a way forward in improving students' output:

'We have to develop our own programmes and our own system of evaluation and assessments in order to get students to good standards.' (C1.2)

Successful affiliation in this context seems to be linked to HEIs demonstrating effort at management level to justify need, maximize benefit from partners, and show transformative impact on behaviour, especially when there is scope for trading education for monetary purposes. Commodification of education may lead to local HE being disadvantaged, as the party less experienced in dealing with partners, when entering agreements that do not serve the former well. Contextualization, partner's awareness of local context needs, and adaptation to local context, are other key factors contributing to the success of affiliation, probably before moving to a stage of capacity building that allows indigenous local development of programmes.

B) Case 2

For many interviewees in C2, factors contributing to success seem to be, as similarly seen in C1, grounded in the suitability of affiliation, its services to the local context, and its ability to meet real needs and produce tangible results.

For example, interviewees expect the impact of a successful affiliation to be seen at teaching and learning level, probably in terms of teacher efficiency and productivity, as expressed by this interviewee:

'Maybe I shouldn't blame the affiliates. Maybe the type of affiliation we have works this way. I don't know but I know that it is not good for us. I haven't seen the contract but an excellent affiliation is the one that makes teachers do more and know what exactly they are doing and how they are doing it … one that gets students to do more and learn more.' (C2.8)

While this PHEI doesn't have issues with contextualization because it develops its own material (except for two participants who have had experience with a *franchise* affiliation), many expressed dissatisfaction with the affiliation in that it seems to follow a certain routine that scratches the surface of issues and may not extend to addressing key issues, or 'dig deep' into their problems:

'Affiliates don't contribute to my work. They just write their reports and that is it. They do give advice but ***they don't dig deep in what we do, what we give*** *or don't give. They don't dig into our real problems, they don't.'* (C2.8)

Successful partnership is seen also in the time devoted to the PHEI between visits. Interviewees recognize how challenging it is for the partners to manage from a distance and give attention to the partnership once the visit is over and they get back on campus to be faced again with their own issues. Good partners are expected to be accessible and available, providing attention and guidance to their distant partners, in this case the local PHEIs:

*'As soon as they get back to their country, they forget everything about us because of the distance and that is a huge gap…. Also faculty over there are busy enough having a lot of research … **why should they bother** somewhere else if they have enough research and enough money?'*

Like C1, C2 interviewees place importance on partners' sensitivity to the local context and the need to acknowledge cultural differences if the affiliation is to be successful. An interviewee in Case 2 expressed it thus:

'I want Australians to know that this is not Australia and Britons to know this is not Britain … you can't take a solution from A, pick it up and move it to B and expect it to be the same because it isn't the same. Everything is a context. You can't move HE policies from one place to the other and expect the same outcome because those places are different, people are different, cultures are different, aspirations are different, history is different.'

In C2, successful partnership is seen in the advancement it demonstrates at different levels. It is perceived as successful when it shows improvement at the teaching and professional level. Successful partners are expected to go beyond performing routine tasks to showing genuine interest in addressing local problems, realizing that the uniqueness of contexts may require different solutions.

C) Case 3

As mentioned earlier, C3 is mainly involved in *cooperation* at the level of providing services and research projects, unlike C1 and C2, which have experienced and been involved in *affiliation*. Yet, the success factors of transnational partnership in C3 do not fall far from the factors mentioned in C1 and C2 in terms of clarity of purpose, and the improvement and advantages it brings to the context.

C3 prioritizes suitability of the partner, as do C1 and C2. In addition, C3 takes into consideration international partners' reputation, ranking and accreditation as key measures when selecting a partner, besides knowledge of their overall direction:

'You need to look at it very carefully. You have to look at their strategic plan, what they represent, you select on what you feel would be good working relationship and if it is going to benefit both of you. You look at it based on a variety of criteria. Ranking is one of them but you want to look at a university that maybe has established its reputation, has passed accreditation, has the research expertise, that you might need to learn from.' (C3.1)

Nevertheless, as reported by the interviewees, the uniqueness of C3's approach to transnational higher education in the form of 'cooperation' requires the suitability of a partner to go beyond the organization to the suitability of individuals who are committed to making things work within partner organizations. In other words, there is reliance on effort exhibited at individual level (that of ground workers) for a certain project or service to succeed. Time devoted to partnership is just as valued in this context as in C1 and C2. This sort of 'bottom-up' approach to tackling *cooperation* is highlighted by the following interviewee:

'You have to know who you are working with. Now there are so many key performance indicators to show how good they are. The partner is the institution as a whole but also the individuals who are in the relationship. Individuals are the main players because they will implement what we are after. Is he or she a serious genuine working academic who is willing to cooperate or not? Because if he or she is not, you will not have a good partner. The institution should help in achieving the scope of the agreement.' (C3.4)

In C3, while some success factors are similar to those of C1 and C2, other success factors of transnational partnership are context-bound, specific to the C3 context and linked to the TNHE approach chosen. Cooperation in C3 requires importance to be placed on individuals' approaches and relationships if projects are to succeed.

6.2.3.1 Partner's Visit and Contributions to Quality

The fourth research question, **RQ 4: How do they see transnational partnerships as a contribution to quality?**, was initially approached in the interviews by asking the interviewees to report on their experiences with partners in terms of benefits and, specifically, their contribution to quality assurance.

Interviewees were asked to describe the **partner's visit** in terms of activities covered and areas of partners' focus and concern, in order to find out the extent to which partners' activities are perceived as meeting the expectations of the local PHEIs. Moreover, interviewees were asked to provide opinions on the extent to which they consider the partner's activity to actually be assuring quality, and what might limit such endeavours and/or present challenges.

A) Case 1

As already mentioned, interviewees in C1 experienced TNHE in terms of *affiliation*, its characteristics being identified in Table 17. This type involves importing a curriculum and programme, one mode of this process being *franchise* agreements. 9 out of 11 participants stated that partners involved in such an affiliation would be responsible for certain aspects, academic in nature and related to curriculum and assessment, that are expected to meet certain standards. This is well reflected in the following quote:

'They are responsible for providing curriculum, keeping academic standards, giving qualification and assuring quality of their programme … visited us twice a year, assessed exams, conducted workshops for staff and verified results.' (C1.1)

In addition, partners perform certain sets of tasks when they visit local PHEIs. Examples would be visiting classrooms, meeting with students and staff to discuss issues related to teaching and learning, verifying results, checking assessment and conducting different workshops and seminars for staff and management:

'*A typical visit was like this: meetings with the faculty members, making some classroom visits, they saw the process of teaching, there were discussions about issues with staff, some workshops in areas concerning teaching. For example, planning a lecture, syllabi, course objectives, course alignment in the programme.'* (C1.5)

However, one participant continued to reflect more deeply on what appeared to be a positive contribution and highlighted points related to partners' efficiency and effectiveness. The

interviewee questioned the reliability of advice in light of limited knowledge of the local context:

'It wasn't often but happened like once a year, overall, 3 or 4 times throughout the entire period of affiliation. Of course, more could be done but there were distance limitations and also there were limitations that they only came as visitors; they don't know how things are here, they don't know the level of students or the environment. It would be nice if somebody came and stayed here permanently, say a year, so we have easy access to advice and constructive discussions.' (C1.5)

The issues reported in C1 have relevance to international partners' efficacy as reported above in terms of the extent to which a short visit may or may not satisfy the real needs of local partners and address their context-based challenges.

When it comes to Cooperation, interviewees reported that there was an agreement with a partner for it to act as a consultant. Consultancy in C1 is classified under 'Cooperation'. Yet almost all the participants reported that, under this type, they were not aware of any visits until the date.

B) Case 2

The majority of interviewees in C2 reported experiences and involvement in both *affiliation* and *franchising* activities, as described in Table 18. The *franchise* visit reported was very similar to the *affiliation* visit reported in C1. Participants reported that visits varied depending on partners. Some contributed more than others.

However, the current involvement of this HEI is mainly in *affiliation*. Participants' common description of the visit actually points to *affiliation*, which requires partners to assure quality and not necessarily to provide programmes. The following are two accounts describing the visits received:

'When affiliates come, we give them course portfolio for all the courses. In the course portfolio, there are many things: student work, course profile, course revision, data, whatever. We put them in a room, we put the guy in this room, we lock the room on him for two days, he reviews all the papers and then writes a report. After that, he interviews staff, walks into the labs to see facilities. Then we have a feedback meeting after the 2 or 3 days for all people who came for the visit. They send us a report afterwards and we have to do an action plan on it. We send a response to them and a copy goes to the MoHE.' (C1.2)

The visit in this description has a lot in common with the one described in C1. The interest and focus of the visit is in having documentation in place, visiting classes, talking to staff and students and then sending a report containing comments to the management of the local HEI. Moreover, a copy is sent to the MoHE, which is the authority supervising the performance of private colleges and universities.

As for *cooperation*, as expressed within Theme 1, it was recognized by interviewees in C2. However, as a future direction, no experiences are indicated and it has yet to emerge in this PHEI.

C) Case 3

Despite the distinction established by interviewees in this PHEI between *affiliation* and *cooperation* as seen in Table 19, experience of TNHE in C3 is primarily in the form of *cooperation*. Interviewees stated that partners' visits are target focused. There is no common purpose to the visit, as there is in C1 and C2. Every visit might have a different purpose, cover a different topic and involve different participants.

'There are policies and documentation through proper channels. For example, if we are going to meet with a university, there is always an initial meeting somehow and things are documented professionally. There is an MOU written and contract and clauses stipulate what the relationship is going to be about so that gives you guidelines. So both parties know what they need to work towards and we can measure. For example, with research there is time frame.' (C3.4)

Sometimes the same visit combines activities related to teaching and learning but also to assuring quality. Another example would be cooperating on a research project and also holding a workshop related to research.

'It is an official visit generally, very well organized. There is an atrium; there is a programme that is drafted. It starts out with an email or an idea. The visit has a purpose whether it is in the area of engineering or whatever. They are coming, for example, to look at A,B,C. Quite often, we provide tours and hospitability things. Two weeks ago, we had a team from X university. They did external assessment and they also ran an academic workshop.' (C3.1)

It seems that this PHEI uses international partners for focused purposes, in which case the usual period of cooperation may not be as long as the period experienced in C1 and C2. This is due to a focus on services and research rather than on delivering a programme, for example.

To conclude, visits differ depending on the scope of partnership. In C1, a broad scope involving programmes that belong to partners is seen in many activities. In C2 there is a similarly broad scope that is periodic and covered on a routine basis. Key issues regarding the visits seem to revolve around frequency of visits, the extent to which they benefit the local PHEIs given variations in context, the limited time the partners spend in PHEIs, and the usefulness of activities covered during the visit. As for visits in C3, the scope is narrower, shorter in time scale and more tightly focused.

6.2.4 Challenges and Concerns

Across the three cases, interviewees' responses suggest that a partnership is a multidimensional phenomenon that cannot be seen in isolation. Rather, they articulated different issues, leading to the emergence of the last theme: challenges and concerns in the three case studies as shown in Table 23**.** The two categories, challenges and concerns, were combined because they were interrelated with a categorization within which great similarities appeared. They could fit into six main categories: National, Cultural, Academic, Organizational, Social and Geographic.

Category	Challenge	C1	C2	C3
National	• Clarity at national level regarding social, economic and educational objectives guiding HEIs' decisions and choice of partners	✓	✓	✓
	• Fitness for purpose of education in Oman	✓	✓	✓
	• Multiplicity of programmes that providers offer in HE with lack of uniformity of provision	✓	✓	✓
	• Focus on transformative impact of education	✓	✓	✓
	• Need to start developing indigenous knowledge	✓	✓	✓
Cultural	• Need for partners to treat Omani context differently considering its identity and uniqueness, to avoid conflicts and incompatibility of perspectives	✓	✓	✓

Academic	Local Academic Issues	• Fitness of purpose and suitability of programmes for Oman, contextualization and integration of content to Omani context	✓	✓	
		• Complexity of the Omani education system in terms of interaction of affiliation with human input of students and lecturers	✓	✓	
		• Academic control and accountability at teaching and learning level in local HEI	✓	✓	✓
		• Mismatch between students' intake level and partners' international standards	✓	✓	✓
	Partner Academic Issues	• Partners' expectations of staff and students in terms of skills and abilities in local HEIs	✓	✓	✓
		• Partners' support at research level	✓	✓	✓
		• Partners' support at teaching and learning level	✓	✓	
		• Involvement of partner in student teaching	✓	✓	✓
		• Partner's solutions' reflection of reality	✓	✓	
		• Tendency of partner to judge local context based on previous experiences that may be irrelevant	✓	✓	✓
		• Pace of learning and patience of partner with young local HEI	✓	✓	✓
		• Partner's insufficient knowledge of the local HEI context	✓	✓	✓
		• Ethics and integrity of provider	✓	✓	✓
Institutional		• Governance, management, decision-making and values in areas concerning affiliation	✓	✓	
		• Appropriateness of some approaches followed in selecting a partner	✓	✓	
		• Power and identity tension between partner and local HEI	✓	✓	
		• Mismatch between the local HEIs and partners, causing possible disappointment	✓	✓	
		• Ability to maintain partner's interest in the relationship	✓	✓	✓

	• Unrealistic ambitions, goals and expectations of what can be achieved	✓	✓	✓
	• Ability to systematically build capacity, manage partners and maximize benefits from affiliations	✓	✓	✓
	• Ability to put partner's comments to good use	✓	✓	✓
	• Stability of local HEIs	✓	✓	
	• Resources and funds available to increase benefits from partner and support requirements of partners	✓	✓	✓
	• Insufficient communication of affiliation's purpose and scope in relation to the institution	✓	✓	✓
	• Sustainability of local HEIs	✓	✓	✓
	• Credibility and reliability of PHEIs' reports to local authorities of progress and benefits from affiliates	✓	✓	✓
	• Staff retention and insufficient Omani human capital development, especially in academia	✓	✓	✓
Social	• Perceptions and attitudes of consumers and community that associate quality with a foreign qualification regardless of what it offers	✓	✓	✓
Geographic	• Obstacles related to geographical position of the HEI, having impact on ability to meet demands of partner's programme	✓	✓	✓

Table 22: Challenges and Concerns

There were similarities across C1, C2 and C3 regarding some categories such as *National, Cultural, Social and Geographical* challenges. However, there were differences in respect of *Academic and Organizational* challenges.

Interviewees, especially at top and middle management level, believed that more planning and guidance from the government were needed to guide institutions. In addition, amongst interviewees generally, there was a consensus on including cultural challenges, concerning (some) partners' perceived insensitivity to the local context. This perception gave room for conflict when practices and programme contents were not considered to fit the Omani context, a factor which links back to the qualities of a good partner.

Academic challenges were seen as shared between local HEIs and partners. It was very interesting to observe many interviewees across C1, C2 and C3 demanding greater accountability at teacher and class level. It was believed that lecturers are being given (unjustified) autonomy in the absence of a system in institutions that ensures standards will be met and aligns academic practices, for example, when dealing with unprepared students. C1 and C2 made a connection between this issue and the complexity of HE in terms of the many expatriate lecturers, foreign curriculums that are mainly taught in English language and foreign academic partners.

As can be seen from Table 23, academic challenges associated with a partner were seen as almost alike in C1, C2 and C3. Interviewees highlighted the problem that, despite having a partner, they felt that they didn't receive enough support. They felt that partners might come with preconceptions and expectations of skills and abilities that were not matched by the local context. Sometimes due to lack of knowledge of real issues in the local context, solutions partners offered were unlikely to be helpful. In some instances, partners were felt to lack integrity and an ethical ability to do the right thing, especially when their main concern was financial gain.

With reference to organizational challenges, opinions in C1 and C2 reflected difficulties seen as resulting from local management's decisions to choose certain partners, or to start or end an *affiliation* or *cooperation* for the wrong reasons, which could lead to complications and disappointment at later stages. That being said, interviewees across C1, C2 and C3 felt that the MoHE should adopt a more robust approach to scrutinizing agreements and following up the partnerships, especially when reports might not be the most reliable and valid source of evidence. Other challenges related to resources and sustainability of HEIs were common across the three cases.

Finally, participants reported social challenges concerning societal awareness of what quality means and the need to trust local providers. Moreover, some pointed out that the geographical location of the PHEI institution could be a disadvantage, for example when it comes to availability of support for industry or employment.

Overall, interviewees mentioned more than 30 challenges, most of them academic in nature.

A) Case 1

In this context, interviewees showed high levels of awareness of the complexity of the Omani educational context and expressed a belief that more and better national criteria were needed to unify programme provision:

'What is happening makes no sense. There are 3 categories of HEIs: university, university college and a college. Some are running the programmes of the affiliated universities. The degrees are even awarded by that partner university. Some universities have taken the programmes and contextualized and customized. Each country's requirements are different. That means programmes are different. However, all these programmes are administered to Omani students. They may not be identical, true, and this is OK. But there has to be some kind of uniformity. Some basic things have to be the same. However, if they are learning different things, then this doesn't make sense at all.' (C1.10)

Interviewees believed that international partners might not be patient with local HEIs in terms of giving them time and space while guiding them, especially when the local institution is dealing with many challenges of its own such as student intake:

'The most important challenge is the pace. You have to go step by step, which is sometimes difficult especially if your affiliate is international. Also, partners' standards are very high, the ambitions are very high and you have to upgrade the students' level whose main challenge is language and communication. You know that private universities in Oman don't get elite students. We mainly have students scoring between 50s and 60s, students who have had 12 years of Arabic language media of study. Students who are not necessarily motivated to study.' (C1.11)

Interviewees have different views on how to tackle differences of provision and criteria. Some think that content customization and tailoring could be the solution:

'When you tailor something, you have to tailor it according to your life, culture, industry and ambitions. You can consult on how to do things. But to take everything, say for example, from Europe or the West and bring it here to one of the third world countries, well, it doesn't work. You have to customize according to your needs.' (C1.4)

However, others believe that the problem is bigger than modifying content, as it extends to fundamental ideological differences that do not necessarily entail appreciation of local cultures:

'In international business, there is a term we use called "self referencing criteria". It means that you are trying to interpret others' culture based on yours. So everyone is trying to look at me from his own perspective not being able to understand others' perspective. You tend to associate things with your nearest understanding and therefore apply the same behaviour to another culture. The result could be disastrous.' (C1.7)

At a micro level, challenges seem to revolve around the young local HEIs' ability to really identify their purposes and decide how to make use of affiliation.

'The ability of HEIs to identify what they really need from a partner and the help they can get from them is not fully developed, in my opinion, because that requires experience and planning.' (C1.8)

This is linked also to many remarks about management's judgement in relation to starting or terminating an affiliation:

'You know, though our first affiliation approach was really good, it had to stop. The reason is that the partners thought we were not ready to go to a higher level of qualification. They were thinking positively and they wanted us to wait longer to develop more, get more feedback from the community. However, the local management then thought it was an urgent need to move on and thought students may go somewhere else.' (C1.2)

Interviewees also brought up the challenge of management stability and consistency:

'There has been a problem with continuity. People come and go. Everybody brought their ideas, started to run and then went away. The new one scrapped old ideas, put new ones and they went away. This caused university to lose momentum. This is a problem situation in which I blame affiliates. There has to be some sort of succession plan that includes who would take over and how the grooming for local people to take over should be done. So how ready are people here to take over is a concern to me.' (C1.7)

At an academic level, a very common challenge for interviewees is the relevance and practicality of the affiliates' advice, when it is based on experience gained in other contexts:
'Telling me what I have to do in the classroom is easy. Instead of coming for a couple of days and tell me what to do, come yourself and teach for a while, see exactly what is going on, see the obstacles and then based on reality, in this particular environment and your experience, give us much more constructive advice. Don't base your judgements on your past experience

that had nothing to do with my environment. We had the same advisors who gave the same unrealistic advice. I think that is what is missing because it could have saved a lot of effort.' (C1.5)

'Somebody came and gave a speech about marketing but the person who came seemed to really have no idea about our university. He didn't even know it was private, he didn't understand the level of students and so it wasn't an affiliation that I think was really helpful for both sides.' (C1.4)

As seen above, challenges vary but the key ones seem to be mostly organizational and academic, as management's competencies and affiliates' ability to benefit institutions at academic level seem to surface in this context.

B) Case 2

Challenges in this Case are more concerned with expectations and abilities of both partners to an affiliation. Interviewees drew attention to gaps in performance of both institutions and students which occur despite having an affiliate, due to issues of implementation and resources, amongst other reasons:

'Honestly speaking, there is a rosy false picture about affiliation regarding matching affiliates' standards and matching everything they do in their own universities. There is a gap that has to be considered. It is true that I am affiliated with another university; however, to what extent am I capable of meeting their demands and requirements?' (C2.4)

Just as in Case 1, private universities get students who are not the best since those choose to go mainly to government HEIs. Moreover, in this Case also there is a struggle to increase the progression rate and the passing rate.

'Private universities get students after SQU, Colleges of Applied Sciences, Finance College, and government institutions. So those who don't get scholarships would come to Private Universities. Most students who can't do it, they leave after the second year with a diploma and only 20-30% go to the third year. By then they will have been filtered. So students who go to 3rd and 4th year are really students who have what it takes to be good graduates. The rest have to graduate with a diploma.' (C2.7)

Some academic staff felt that having unprepared students made the struggle to teach impact on them negatively, affecting their morale and possibly their motivation to continue to work.

'When we go home, we feel down, we feel upset. I ask myself what am I doing here? Why do I teach here? I have to go somewhere but where is this somewhere? It is not easy to find.' (C2.8)

It is interesting to see that affiliates' contribution is not evident in some areas related to academic teaching and learning. Interviewees questioned the suitability of their affiliation:

'Nobody has actually told us from the affiliates what is missing here. For example, to say you have this form, you need to use it for this purpose or … you need to have such statistics in order to know such thing … you need to do this or this is how you do a programme revision … this is something for research that you need to do or have… NO, NOTHING.' (C2.2)

Some participants, therefore, highlighted challenges in cost effectiveness and value for money of the affiliate services:

'It is always about cost and cost benefit analysis. To what extent we can afford to pay this much money to get this much benefits to our university and staff?' (C2.6)

This is linked to another main challenge highlighted in this context, which is the commitment of the teaching faculty. Some interviewees question the ethical dimensions of the teaching faculty and feel that teachers should be accountable for their performance:

'You need someone to look at what teachers are doing. Don't put your faith in them, thinking that they will do a good job.… The contract has to be tough to be useful. It has to aim at getting good quality teaching.' (C2.4)

Many interviewees drew attention to the suitability of programmes for the Omani context. They share similar concerns with their colleagues in C1 in relation to creating a national identity and evaluating the educational system before seeking affiliations. They suggest going back to basics and questioning the philosophy of education:

'Any programme in the world carries an educational philosophy that is intentionally implanted in it, that is rooted in the society itself. It could be great for that society but you cannot bring it and paste it in another society … find out about that philosophy before you import a programme

... it may not be suitable for you. We need to clarify the educational philosophy for Oman first before we decide what we need from an affiliate.' (C2.10)

It is interesting to see that the main challenges at this context are focused on the benefits of affiliation, as many interviewees feel that it is not helping academics and question its value. It is equally alarming to see poor progression rates and staff inability to deal with students despite having an affiliate. Some believe that more accountability is needed, especially from lecturers who, as seen above, seem to have worrying issues. Other challenges are related to educational guidance at national level in terms of the purpose of higher education.

C) Case 3

In this Case, challenges identified were related to the need for government guidance, and availability of resourceful people who can mobilize agreements and ensure accountability at the teaching and learning level.

Some participants acknowledge the pressure PHEIs are under to show progress and demonstrate compliance with standards:

'International universities have had their time to mature and accommodate their standards and change in their own countries over years, whereas we as a sector in Oman, we haven't had a long time and so things have to happen very quickly because of the growth. So sometimes when you are running very fast, it is easy to miss, not see things or even trip because you are running and running and trying to do as much as possible; you rush to things without careful thought and assessment.' (C3.1)

Just as in the other Cases, voices here reveal a need for guidance from the government:

'Yes, we need direction and we need a strategy. If you have a strategy, you will say OK I will educate these, I will do vocational training for these but without that unfortunately there is nothing. We can't really work out our programmes and activities. Sometimes we get confused and do things differently. We waste our time and effort.' (C3.4)

As for the other challenges specific to this Case, interviewees have reported that the selective approach of the partners is all about having people who can make things happen. These people are not necessarily managers or top decision-makers:

'The challenge is the resource person, the person who we are dealing with on the ground. This is an important factor. Without this resource person, no memorandum can succeed. What I mean is that if there is no one following up your need, then it will not work.' (C3.2)

It is interesting to see that academic challenges also exist in terms of ability to focus on transferring knowledge properly to students, ensuring staff exchange and establishing teaching accountability:

'Most of knowledge is global. I can get it from books, internet and everywhere but how we transfer this knowledge to students and how our systems work, this is the most important thing to focus on.' (C3.3)

One interviewee criticized the perception that educational quality is found in accreditation and quality assurance measures. He believes that these measures serve other purposes that may not necessarily relate to or help with teaching and learning:

'What we call quality in education is not actually good for everything. Quality assurance does not improve your teaching or students' learning simply by following quality standards. You can improve your management of HEIs, documenting what you are doing but when it comes to transforming learners, this quality criteria and accreditation do not help much.'

'Staff exchange is very difficult to make happen. Even if there is agreement dated today for someone to come over, it takes 6 or 7 months for that person to be able to come for 3 weeks.' (C3.5)

*'The academics especially from Arab world and even from Europe, the old generation especially, they tend not to like people interfering in their business. They feel like they are professors, associates, assistants or full professors. Who is he? I have been teaching this course for the past 15 years.' (*C3.4)

6.3 Conclusion

TNHE is experienced in two broad but distinctive forms: *affiliation* and *cooperation*. *Affiliation* was constantly compared against *cooperation* in all the three Cases. While interviewees in C1 and C2 shared the perception that *affiliation* was a stage, they differed on what the stage meant

and what its characteristics were. For example, while C1 interviewees viewed it as a first stage in an organization development, C2 interviewees believed it was the second stage. At odds with both of these, C3 interviewees believed that it was not necessarily a stage so much as a model.

First and most importantly, interviewees across all three cases were in favour of *cooperation* rather than *affiliation*. The preference for this concept is underpinned by perceptions related to power, autonomy and experience, as illustrated in Tables 17, 18 and 19.

Second, academic partners' rationales for engaging in TNHE are believed to include generating revenue, furthering internationalization, helping countries in their capacity building, competing globally and promoting cultural understanding. However, Omani HEIs offer more diverse rationales in seeking partnerships. These rationales are mainly concerned with building capacity and assuring quality. However, there were others related to gaining reputation and promotion, serving Omanization and gaining credibility and community trust. C3 is the only case that reported rationales related to interest in involvement in activities that promote internationalization.

Third, regarding factors that contribute to the success of partnerships, the top reasons are related to clarity of purpose before seeking partnerships, ability of local PHEIs to manage partners and ability of partners to deliver and achieve results.

Finally, interviewees in C1 and C2 reported that participants focus on certain activities when they visit them. These activities include document checking, visiting classrooms, conversing with staff and students, checking assessments and the like. However, issues were reported in relation to frequency of activity and the extent to which such activities actually contribute to a transformational impact, especially on students. Interviewees in CS3 reported a visit that is very specific and varies depending on purpose and scope.

However, interviewees across the three cases also reported various challenges that might limit the benefits to be gained from partnership. As seen in Table 23, academic and organizational challenges constitute key difficulties that may hinder efforts to fulfil the rationales reported under Theme 2.

Chapter 7 will present analysis of the last stage of research: Stage 3, which was conducted with policy-makers and government officials on some issues that emerged from this stage.

Chapter 7: Presentation and Analysis of Data 2: The Policy and Decision-Makers

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I present my analysis of data gathered from Stage 3 of the research. This was conducted in Winter 2013 and focused on eliciting views and comments from policy and decision-makers in higher education in Oman, specifically representatives from those bodies with responsibility for oversight of private higher education in Oman and for higher education policy, with specific reference to TNHE and to quality.

Unfortunately, I was unable to interview anyone from the Oman Academic Accreditation Authority (OAAA), despite several attempts to do so. Replies received indicated that at that time, they were not available for interviews with researchers due to pressures of existing commitments and time constraints. However, some of the documents published on the OAAA website were utilized in this research as supporting evidence.

Having said that, I did secure interviews with two representatives of Oman's State Council (Education Committee), one representative of the Supreme Council for Planning and three from the Ministry of Higher Education (3 Participants). As decision takers and policy makers, it was obviously important to incorporate their views, particularly with regard to the data collected in Stage 2, from staff of the three case PHEIs. Moreover, the interviews in Stage 3 served the purpose of helping to triangulate the data, across the three Stages.

By the time the Stage 3 interviews were carried out, four key themes had emerged from the research:

1. The relationship between the concepts of *affiliation* and *cooperation* and the way these are perceived and used by staff of the institutions
2. The varying 'rationales' behind pursuing *affiliation* and how these are seen within the local institutional context
3. Issues related to efficacy and success and the key factors contributing to the success (or otherwise) of a TNHE partnership involving an Omani PHEI
4. Challenges and concerns, as seen by the staff of the three Case PHEIs interviewed in Stage 2.|

Out of these themes, a number of issues were identified. To be specific, the Stage 2 data highlighted three areas that became central to the interviews with people from the Government:

- In terms of *affiliation* and *cooperation*, it was seen that there are multiple understandings in the three cases. Therefore, the first objective for the interviews carried out in Stage 3 was clarifying meanings of these key concepts *affiliation*, *cooperation*, and others that seem to influence decisions in the sector such as *maturity*, in terms of how such concepts are understood and used by policy and decision-makers.

- With reference to the *rationales* behind seeking affiliation, it was seen that various rationales are reported, some specific to individual cases. Such variation requires the understanding of the original intentions and rationales as seen from the policy and decision-making level, including exploring the extent to which there is compatibility between the rationales as understood by staff within the three case PHEIs and those that prevail at the national, governmental level.

- In Stage 2, in relation to efficacy, success, challenges and concerns, interviewees reported different views regarding the very usefulness of Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) itself. This indicated a need to explore this issue with key actors at Government level in respect of their understanding of the effectiveness of TNHE affiliation and its future in Oman.

Stage 3 allowed for sharing key findings from the Stage 2 interviews with the interviewees from the Government and eliciting their response. Further, Stage 3 served the purpose of verifying the extent to which there is compatibility (or lack of it) in views and expectations between the sector in one hand (C1, C2 and C3) and the policy and decision-makers.

What follows is divided into two parts. Part 1 summarizes the analysis of interviewees in the MoHE as the authority that supervises the PHEIs. Interviewees from this authority will be referred to as M1, M2 and M3. Part 2 incorporates the views of the remaining two authorities: the State Council of Oman Education Committee and the Supreme Planning Council. They will be referred to as G1, G2, G3.

7.2 The View from the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE)

At the time of the interviews, the Ministry was engaged in trying to find ways of judging, making sense of or evaluating what is happening in the affiliation arena. This explains why my first interview with an MoHE representative begins with the interviewee stating that:

'You are hitting a very important topic which we are at the government busy with because we are thinking about the effectiveness of affiliation now.' (M1)

7.2.1 *Affiliation* and *Cooperation*, as Seen from the MOHE

Regarding the first theme, the interviews with MoHE representatives revealed that the same distinction between *affiliation* and *cooperation* is drawn in the MoHE as in the case institutions (Stage 2). Moreover, interviewees expressed views more or less consistent with those of Stage 2 interviewees when defining *cooperation*. However, there were variations amongst Ministry informants in defining what the word 'affiliation' means. This variation was similar to that seen in Stage 2 regarding this concept. For example, for M1, *affiliation* covers any collaboration involving provision of a programme that leads to a certificate from a partner:

'When we say an affiliate, there is a type of commitment in offering programmes and offering certificates of the partner, I mean to award certificates to local students.' (M1)

For the second interviewee, *affiliation* describes programmes that allow some degree of customizing. Therefore, it differs from *hosted programme*, which exists only when a mother university opens a local branch in Oman.

'Affiliation is not a hosted programme because hosted means that the programme is applied here exactly under the same circumstances of that in the mother university. As if the institution here is a branch of that university ... like franchise and we don't have that here ... the management in a franchise comes from the mother university. Affiliation means applying the partner's programme but with allowing some sort of modification or customization to suit the Omani context.' (M2)

However, M3 uses the words 'host' differently to indicate that it needn't be a branch of the same mother university. It is simply a foreign partner working with a local Omani institution:

'*Affiliation means full host. It means that the same programme is applied here under the supervision of the partner university. The mother university supervises the academic matters, approving teachers and they are expected to visit the local university regularly and follow up with them.'* (M3)

This highlights possible confusion even within the Ministry when it comes to *affiliation*. A plausible explanation could be found in the many forms *affiliation* takes, especially in the absence of a classifying or organizing mechanism, as interviewee M1 explains below (section 7.2.2).

As for *cooperation*, Ministry interviewees agreed that it is selective and focuses on a particular area that is identified by the local HEI, which does not necessarily involve a programme, as it could take the form of academic support, a service or a consultation. For example, according to M1:

'But when we say partnership, you create a kind of partnership or cooperation with one institution but you select in which area they can support you. For example, support in the academic side, service side, sometimes they use them as an advisory. They go to them when they need them. So there is no heavy commitment for the local institution. It is a light tie up and a light commitment.' (M1)

M 2 agrees that the relationship indicated by *Cooperation* is not very strong:

'*In cooperation, relationships are not very strong. Local institutions don't depend heavily on partners. They don't take their programmes, for example*.'

To conclude, the above suggests that *affiliation* involves a programme/course offer and certification with the partner's name attached. Moreover, an *affiliative* relationship is perceived as stronger than *cooperation*. This assumption is likely to be linked to the conclusion drawn earlier, that the power and authority of the partner are stronger and also that, with *affiliation*, the duration of the programme/course is greater.

Moreover, the analysis reflects a degree of clarity in defining and understanding *cooperation* in general. This clarity reflects a close alignment between the views expressed by MoHE interviewees and those that emerged from the Stage 2 interviews with staff of the case institutions C1, C2 and C3.

This is not so with *affiliation*. The variation or perhaps confusion surrounding the concept of *affiliation* required further investigation, with subsequent questions aiming to unpack the understandings of the word.

7.2.2 Rationale, Original Intentions and Expectations

In this section, I aim to focus on operationalization of *affiliation* in policy and practice. Therefore, this section will address Ministry informants' views on this topic in two separate parts. Part A aims to show how *affiliation* was expected to work when the government decided to introduce the policy of mandating partnerships (affiliations) and how things have changed over time, in a complex process of development that has impacted on the whole concept of *affiliation*. I then attempt to do the same for *cooperation* in Part B.

A) Affiliation

To begin with, M1 explained that *affiliation* was first thought of during the period when higher education in Oman was provided by colleges that did not have much experience with HE. The first college opened in 1995, which means that the HE sector was quite young:

'The government thought that having affiliation would be a helpful tool for institutions to start and mature. At the beginning the government decided to make it compulsory because the first college started in 1995. With a new sector, you need help and partners to help you reach maturity.' (M1)

The above is consistent with the Stage 2 interviewees' account of using experienced partners in order to help the sector develop and reach maturity.

In the MoHE interviews, I posed a follow-up question to find out why *affiliation* was specifically selected, rather than any other mechanism to help develop and support the sector. It emerged that accreditation seemed to play a major role in this decision. Accredited programmes are perceived as recognized. They are believed to possess quality that is assured by conformity with pre-checked, pre-approved standards at institutional and (sometimes) at quality authority levels. In addition, the recognized qualifications are expected to help in establishing a system that is based on meeting standards. A second reason is that *affiliation* ensures student mobility and credit transfer to other HEIs:

'Why are we attracted to affiliation? Because of the accreditation concept. We need to attract accredited programmes to come to the country. Second, we would like to have a system where students' certificates are recognized elsewhere to help them move in case they want to continue studying somewhere else.' (M1)

This implies an important understanding, namely, that accredited programmes are attractive because they carry a certain (quality) value, probably because they are usually monitored and approved by the relevant authorities to ensure that certain standards are met. This highlights the importance of compliance and conformity to standards as a means of ensuring quality.

Accredited programmes represent quality education because they can be recognized. This made it important and necessary to establish the Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) – the predecessor of the OAAA – which was created only in 2001.

The same consideration appears to be prioritized by the MoHE, in that:

'*We couldn't give accreditation right from the beginning so we have to seek programmes that are accredited so yes, the programme should be accredited.'* (M1)

In addition, a system that has some sort of accreditation, in this case, accredited programmes, is considered to give credibility and recognition:

'We were thinking of students having a credible education. That is why we think of affiliation.' When asked about the meaning of credibility, the interviewee replied that credibility means, *'Simply the education that has meaning to students, helps them polish their skills and helps them be to be an accepted product in the market. If we go further to HE, I would say credible means it has the sense of quality assurance from a mature agency or institution.'* (M1)

The concept of *credibility* and what it means in terms of recognition and ease of mobility (for both students and institutions) has emerged earlier, for example, in C2, which demonstrated an understanding compatible with that shown above and which uses an international partner to carry out quality assurance checks on its policies and procedures.

The concern here remains as to whether accredited programmes do deliver the value that they promise, considering the many challenges illustrated in Table 23 that face HEIs, the fact that standards followed for accreditation purposes may vary, and the possibility that standards may not be fully relevant to the local HEI.

While *affiliation* is established as a compulsory policy and accredited programmes are required, other choices are left to the institutions' decision-makers, provided that they meet certain conditions:

'When we say it is compulsory, I would say (this is) a concept. It is compulsory to have a partner but what shape of partnerships? What kind of affiliation? We, as a government didn't impose a certain type but we have certain conditions.' (M1)

In relation to the roles and type of 'help' expected from a TNHE partner if the arrangement is to eventually contribute to the local PHEI reaching 'maturity', the view from within the MoHE was expressed thus:

'Affiliates help local institutions in the way they design their programmes and improve them to meet not only local requirements but also international ones because the affiliate has the expertise to do so. Also in terms of assessment. This is the ball we throw at the academics but affiliates can help in setting up a model.' (M1)

The above view again highlights the importance given to quality, perceived in terms of standards and meeting them at programme level, and the depth of affiliates' involvement on an academic level. It also implies affiliates' awareness of students' ability level, to a degree that allows them to cooperate with academics in order to form assessments revolving around students. The interviewee explains further that programme planning is only one aspect of 'help'. Another aspect is *organizational* help, in terms of system capacity building that allows doing things in the right way. Examples are proper selection of staff or, in some types of affiliations, approval of staff themselves working in the PHEI.

'It is not only about the programme but also about the system within institutions and the way they select academic staff. Most of the institutions require the affiliate university to help them select the academic staff or approve the right academic staff who will work in the institution.' (M1)

The interviewee confirms that the above endeavours should ultimately aim at local PHEI independence, maturity and ability to award local certification, as a result of building the capacity for its provision:
'Later they can go ahead by themselves independently, also to get ready to award their own certificate instead of having that international certificate.' (M1)

As mentioned earlier, in terms of programmes, it is mandatory for PHEIs to have a TNHE partnership to help ensure the provision of accredited programmes. The interviewee mentions two types recognized by the MoHE and states that the HEI has the freedom to decide what type to go with:

'*… whether it is franchise or validated. We kept that for the investors to decide, deciding whether they want to go for franchise or validated but at the end, we would like to have a recognized certificate for the students when they graduate that everyone can recognize.'* (M1)

This indicates that as long as the type of affiliation contributes to and results in an outcome recognized (or assured) by a partner, the local PHEIs have the freedom to choose their partners and the way they would like to approach affiliation.

When M3 was asked whether there was an alternative way to classify provisions, the interviewee replied that there was no predetermined classification method for the available TNHE activities in place:

'No, there is no classification system for the types of affiliation or cooperation. We take things on case basis, case by case because of the individuality of institution.'

Needless to say, this freedom, if it continues, has the potential to yield limitless numbers of partners and approaches. This point was raised with the MoHE. Asked how it expected to control the many players in the field, who would inevitably come from varied backgrounds, it replied:

'This will be the role of the institutions, how they can have different affiliations but also have a kind of protocol to manage affiliation.' (M1)

It appears therefore that PHEIs are required to show accountability in relation to the autonomy they are given. In other words, the responsibility for managing TNHE partners is placed on the shoulders of the PHEIs, as a condition of freedom to seek partnership with whomsoever they perceive as helpful. However, with this responsibility comes accountability when they have to justify their decisions to the authorities they report to and also to the external accreditation authority, OAAA.

From the MoHE interviews, it emerged that the introduction of *affiliation* came with certain expectations of how it would run and what it would achieve. The delivery of the programme in Oman was supposed to *mirror* what happens in the partner university:

'We are expecting a mirror programme where if a university in a certain country is delivering a programme, for example in business, then we would like the same programme happening here,' (M1)

This explains why an approach such as *franchise* seems to be favoured by the ministry:

'We find franchise as a good model where the same programme happening there is actually happening here, to the extent that sometimes even in local institutions, they don't have the right to change anything in the programme.' (M1)

However, as shown earlier in section 6.2.1, the franchise is not very popular in the PHEIs and is associated with some undesirable messages related to pre-maturity of the local PHEI and power imbalance in favour of the TNHE partner. In one of the PHEI cases (C3), it exceeds the expected level and extends to values and morals. Here a franchise was perceived by C3 interviewees as an approach associated with clashing values, at times to an alarming degree. In addition, it may be that such an arrangement creates the potential for conflict between the MoHE, as a supervising authority which sees value in a certain arrangement, and the sector, as providers who think otherwise but are still answerable to authorities.

Moreover, there seems to be an understanding that importing the same programme (content) as taught in the international TNHE partner's institution and having it delivered strictly would favourably impact on students' quality. That is further confirmed by M2, who believes that matching delivery would produce students of the same quality as those in the partner university in terms of skills and competencies. This understanding aligns with the rationales given by some interviewees in cases C1 and C2.

Further, expectations of matching delivery were probably raised as a result of measures taken by the TNHE partner, such as applying certain standards, approving academic staff and making continuous visits to the local PHEI to monitor and control aspects of delivery. These are combined with expectations of the depth of affiliate involvement, as mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, such high expectations flag a concern regarding the extent of consideration given to local contextual factors which play a role in delivering a programme, not to mention the relationship with a partner. Most importantly, it flags bigger questions as to how a partner might ensure the delivery of its programme in a manner that delivers what it promises, whatever that promise might include.

Considering the above, it is not surprising that after a period of experiencing affiliation, the MoHE has come to realize that what they expected to happen is not happening:

'We sometimes see two different products or two different qualities happening with the same programme offered abroad and in Oman, although the affiliate is a very strong one. We don't have strong evidence that the programme is offered the same way it is offered in the affiliate university.' (M1)

Further investigation into how this conclusion was reached reveals that two key factors, namely student intake and context, play major roles in changing the dynamics of affiliation.

Student intake is a key challenge that is already recognized by the PHEI sector, partners and the government. However, the solution to this problem is seen as lying in actions that need to be taken during the students' pre-tertiary education stage:

'It is really a challenge to both HEIs, affiliates and the government. To tell you the truth, the only solution we can see is working on the input, which is the students prior to going to the HE. By doing that we can assure that the quality of students going to HE don't have the weaknesses where they can't cope with any system.' (M1)

That being said, there remains the issue of what to do with the students who are already part of the PHEI sector, i.e., those currently enrolled in programmes of study. This seems to be a critical issue that not only needs to be addressed in itself, but also has given rise to changes in the nature of affiliation as a whole, as illustrated above in section 1.3.

To summarize, according to the interviewees in the MoHE, affiliation was introduced when the sector was in need of an authority that could assure the quality of education provision. It was perceived as a suitable solution due to the belief that it could bring accredited programmes, assist with student mobility and secure recognition of their qualification. While affiliation as a policy was mandatory, HEIs were given the freedom to pursue the forms of partnerships deemed suitable for them, provided that they fulfil certain compliance regulations. However, during the course of implementation by PHEIs, contextual forces caused various unexpected outcomes.

B) Cooperation

As mentioned above, when defining *cooperation*, M1 draws attention to its scope, noting that *commitment* in the relationship is not as deep as it is in the case of *affiliation*, given that *cooperation* includes services and research. M3 gives an example of *cooperation* that is narrow in scope:

'A *Memorandum of Understanding, for example, is not an affiliation. Its scope is narrow.'* (M3)

We have learnt that *affiliation* includes delivering a partner's programme. However, *cooperation* can involve programmes through other arrangements. M3 gives the example that a local PHEI can request TNHE partners to design a programme, or can collaborate with a partner to develop a programme. Eventually, however, the programme is delivered wholly by the local PHEI where it carries the local PHEI's name.

Despite the advantages of narrowing down *cooperation* to a particular area, there is a realization that *cooperation* is not a problem-free approach, especially when it comes to the ability to control multiple partners:

'You can get partnership in this and that but you need people who manage this relation and help to meet the requirements of each affiliate without affecting the flavour of the local institution. They have to have the base ready for that collaboration or cooperation. By the way, it requires a lot of management, a lot of maturity within the local institution and a ground that is already solid. Otherwise, it will collapse because you can't invite two systems within the same institution without having the right ground.' (M1)

This again draws attention to the ability of the institution to manage its choices and its partners, who may not be compatible. Incompatibility of standards, expectations, and backgrounds under one roof could cause conflict and risk the collapse of the PHEI. This has already been highlighted in the previous chapter as a key challenge, as well as a key factor affecting the success of *affiliation*.

Moreover, the above observation draws attention to a key factor previously highlighted in the analysis, which is the concept of maturity. Due to the importance of the ability to manage partners, the interviewees were asked to provide access to HEIs' agreements, to allow insight into the types and conditions of agreements. The purpose was to see the extent to which there is clarity in terms of relationship, responsibilities and scope of operation. Unfortunately, access was not possible due to some information being considered sensitive.

Inability to gain access to these documents was disappointing. However, conversation with both M2 and M3 revealed that contracts do not contain much detail. In general, the signed agreements follow, more or less, the same form as those of the MoHE, in which local HEIs

specify the name of the partner and the scope of the agreement. It was inferred that information in the agreements was minimal and typical across the majority of agreements.

Moreover, M3 indicated that *affiliation* agreements are treated differently from *cooperation* agreements. *Affiliation* agreements have to be sent to the MoHE prior to signing with the TNHE partner so that the Ministry can verify that the conditions of partnership are fulfilled. M2 showed me a document containing conditions that aim to control affiliations. Some conditions instruct HEIs to share with the Ministry reports issued by partners following visits to local PHEIs, supported by an action plan showing how the latter are planning to react to the report. The Quality Assurance department in the MoHE then takes responsibility for following up the implementation of these action plans.

However, it appears that, in practice, *cooperation* agreements can be sent to the Ministry after signing with partners for the sake of notifying the Ministry of the existence of the agreement.

To conclude, *cooperation* is similarly identified by the interviewees of the MoHE as another type of TNHE partnership. However, it is perceived as less obligatory than *affiliation*. A key challenge in this approach from the point of view of the MoHE is the level of coordination and control needed to manage the various partners involved at a certain point of time.

7.2.3 Efficacy, Success, Challenges and Concerns

The MoHE also revealed also that there are currently a number of critical issues for the Ministry in this area, namely:

- Student intake and its impact on changing the characteristics of the relationship between local HEI and partners
- Tensions between maintaining the originality of partners' programmes and customizing them to meet the needs of the local context, including learners
- Debates around what makes a PHEI 'mature'
- A need for PHEIs to adopt a more proactive approach and demonstrate responsibility for shaping their own future direction rather than depending on the Government.

These issues are currently either unresolved or causing further complications, resulting in a state of what can be described as confusion, and an inability to identify approaches or what they mean, as expressed by the interviewees. Most importantly, it was reported that the MoHE is currently reconsidering the whole approach of mandating TNHE 'affiliation'.

In the interviews carried out in C1, C2 and C3, student intake was repeatedly mentioned as a problematic issue to deal with. This is well known in the Ministry:

'Some local institutions gave a very strong foundation programme to students for one to two years to get them ready for the affiliate programme, but they were witnessing a lot of failure on that. Only a minority can cope but the majority couldn't.' (M1)

In some cases, it appears that failure in preparing students to meet partners' standards has contributed to fundamental changes to *affiliation*. In other words, locally developed programmes have been taken into consideration as an alternative and better solution to the problem of students' level. Consequently, instead of importing a partner's curriculum/programme, affiliates' help is sought in designing what are perceived as more suitable (local) programmes for students:

'So some affiliates started moving from the same requirements to local requirements which end up then changing the programme to be a local one not international. So the programme is validated instead of franchised where the affiliate university comes with to help the local HE design a programme that can be good for students.' (M1)

What can be inferred is that, first, students are expected to be ready before the date of starting *affiliation*, and if they are not there would be unfavourable consequences that would impact on *affiliation* in general. Most importantly, local programmes are likely to impose lower standards, so a concern could be raised as to how low they might be and what gap might emerge between Omani (PHEI) standards and international standards as represented by the TNHE partners. This issue was further explored with M3, as will be explained later. More significantly, perhaps, it may indicate that *affiliation* is moving in the direction of lowering standards to fit lower-than-expected student abilities, thus deviating from the intended plan:

'For me, this is not the thing we are looking for as Government. If we are not stretching the students, we shouldn't come down to their level … because we are not graduating good quality students that can be competing and offering the right skills to industry.' (M1)

This indicates dissatisfaction with the way *affiliation* is changing, because it is not revolving around students and therefore is not acting as a driving force to improve or 'stretch' students' skills. It either waits for students to become ready so that it can be more effective, or it changes shape and status, and in this case not for the better.

The second key issue is *customization*. As mentioned in Chapter 6, interviewees in C1, C2 and C3 have criticized programmes that do not relate to the Omani context because they are perceived as irrelevant and the knowledge they provide may not be helpful to students when they graduate.

Similarly, expectations of the MoHE are extended to include contextualizing programme content to fit the local context while still maintaining the international dimension of the programme:

'We think that local institutions have to have freedom to customize programmes. However, by doing that, universities sometimes don't accept to give their certificate.' (M1)

This reflects tension between satisfying the requirements of the partner on one hand and meeting local needs on the other. Moreover, it highlights the fact that the desired type of control that made *affiliation* attractive in the first place (as in the originally stated intentions) has itself become an obstacle because of the gaps mentioned so far. That issue is further accentuated when we try to apply lessons from the latest relevant research on student experience in higher education:

'I attended a conference and they were saying let the students decide and choose their own flavour of the programme. It is not about giving a set programme or imposing whatever you want on students. Let them select because the world is changing and their thinking is changing. We need to let them decide what they want.' (M1)

Due to the above challenges, the MoHE is trying to find other options that would give institutions flexibility with programmes and satisfy the need to customize while allowing students the opportunity to choose:

'Now we see how this affiliation is affected and we started to think whether we need affiliation as compulsory or optional for institutions to go for. My opinion is that for new starters, new investors, we might need this kind of partnership with academically mature institutions abroad. For old institutions, I think that they have already gained some kind of maturity where they can run themselves, because some of the criticism to that system we found from the institutions themselves is that they felt that they were paying money for the affiliate but they were not getting (what they were paying for).' (M1)

Maturity seems to be a key influencing factor in HEIs' decisions about which route to take with partners, whether *affiliation* or *cooperation*. It also appears to be a status that not only justifies taking certain decisions but also gives more freedom to an institution that declares itself *mature*.

Therefore, interviewees were asked how to recognize whether an institution is mature or not and whether the MoHE has criteria by which this can be assessed. The answer shows that the topic was being discussed at the time of the interview and consideration was being given to achieving OAAA accreditation status, after gaining which HEIs (including PHEIs) could be considered mature and entitled to more freedom:

'We have been debating about that but the dialogue floating now is the accreditation. Whether they are able to get the local accreditation, then we feel they are mature. If they get the accreditation of OAAA, then we feel that they might be mature to run their own programmes and then move to a higher level, maybe partnership and then they can choose instead of having affiliate, they have partnership with more than one university and they can diversify.' (M1)

As mentioned in Chapter 2 (section 2.7), in terms of OAAA procedures, there is an institutional audit followed by a programme audit; passing the two stages results in accreditation status. It is interesting to note that there were interviewees in all the PHEIs covered in this research who considered their institutions mature (see section 6.2.1), though none of the three PHEIs had gained accreditation status at the time of conducting this research.

The last key issue in terms of *affiliation* and *cooperation* at Ministry level is the view that PHEIs are required to adopt a more proactive approach, to demonstrate responsibility not only for decisions about their relationship with their partners, but also for decisions impacting on and shaping their own future directions. This concern appears in reference to the key challenge highlighted in C1, C2 and C3 regarding the need for guidance at different levels. For example, on their relationship with their partners, the MoHE view is that:

'Policy is very open and flexible. I told you we don't want to pamper the sector by giving them, spoon-feeding them, spelling out everything. By the way, it won't help them. I don't think spelling out affiliation or any other matter would. We are trying to give them the framework and within that, they can move freely…. So it is their decision how they could move within those policies and we have been very flexible as an MoHE to listen and find solutions whenever there is an issue within that policy, though we don't want to keep our policies under, I would say, negotiation but we want also to listen to them.' (M1)

One reason that is given for not setting boundaries at the level that PHEIs desire is related to autonomy: giving HEIs the right to decide what is best for them but at the same time holding them accountable for their choices:

'We want them to decide and define. If an institution didn't reach the level where they can define their strengths and areas for improvement where they want to excel, then we are in danger because these institutions are like their students who are still wanting to be spoon-fed and they want the government to give them instructions.' (M1)

Furthermore, accountability should be demonstrated not only to the MoHE but also to the OAAA as part of the process of gaining accreditation:

'We want them to take decisions so they are held responsible for their decisions. Otherwise, when QA agency comes and accredits that institution, they will feel that the government is responsible as well for any weakness or drawback in the system. We would like them to have the freedom of decision and autonomy where they can work and decide.' (M1)

To summarize, efficacy and success of TNHE partnership for the interviewees of the MoHE is seen in terms of its usefulness to both the students and the community at large. Advantage is seen in the extent to which there is relevance to the local context, contribution to developing learners' skills, and assistance in advancing the quality of education as a whole. A key challenge reported is in the ability of students to cope with TNHE programmes. However, concerns reported by the Ministry are relevant to PHEIs' responsibilities, autonomy and accountability.

7.2.4 Conclusion

To summarize, section 7.2.1 addressed the key themes of conceptualization of the key concepts associated with TNHE partnership: *affiliation* and *cooperation*, rationales of introducing TNHE partnerships, the efficacy and relevant challenges from the point of view of the MoHE participants.

To begin with, according to the MoHE interviewees, *affiliation* was sought because it was perceived as a solution and a controlling mechanism. In the absence of an authority that can control the sector and assure quality of provision, value was seen in *affiliation* because it was associated with accredited programmes that partners were supposed to bring to the country through arrangements such as *franchise*. It was hoped that partners would assist with a newly

developed system in terms of its capacity and thus produce quality graduates whose qualifications were recognized and accredited, and allow student mobility. *Affiliation* came with certain hopes and expectations of how it would run and what it would achieve. While trying to build capacity and develop, the sector was given freedom to decide on the type of TNHE they wanted to be involved in: *affiliation* or *cooperation*. They were also expected to demonstrate ability to manage partners. However, variations in practice were observed in programme delivery as well as in the quality of graduates.

Such variations suggest that when TNHE landed in the local context, the interaction caused shifts not only in intentions but also in direction, especially through the PHEIs' tendency to move from *affiliation* towards *cooperation*. Such shifts are likely to result in multiplicity of practice, lack of clarity in agreed understandings, and possible dissatisfaction.

As for *cooperation*, it seems to be less complicated for the MoHE interviewees in terms of meaning and implementation. It is perceived as lighter in terms of commitment and obligation when it comes to the relationship with partners. Moreover, the presence of *cooperation* in research activities, projects and services makes it easier to classify non-programme delivery activities as *cooperation*. However, a key challenge identified is the extent to which local HEIs are capable of managing and controlling the multiplicity of partners and complexity of arrangements.

All in all, this section has contributed to unpacking different issues related to TNHE partnerships. The two key concepts of *affiliation* and *cooperation* are explored from the point of view of the MoHE representatives. That is, it has clarified the original rationales for introducing TNHE affiliations, the relationship between *affiliation* and *cooperation*, what efficacy means in the context of TNHE, relevant challenges and concerns, all from the point of view of this government authority's representatives, MoHE. The following section is going to explore the same dimensions, however, from the point of view of the Omani government.

7.3 The View from Government

7.3.1 Introduction

In this section, the views of two higher levels of government will be addressed, as expressed in interviews with two representatives of the State Council of Oman and one from the Supreme Planning Council. These interviewees will be referred to as G1, G2 and G3.

Interviews in this group followed the MoHE interviews, though in the same phase of data collection. The main purpose of interviewing G1, G2 and G3, as decision-makers at the highest level of government in Oman, was to explore their views about key issues of importance to PHEIs, such as the need for further direction from the Government, and also the rationales of the *affiliation* policy, their impressions of the effectiveness of *affiliation*, and its future directions in Oman.

7.3.2 *Affiliation* and *Cooperation*, as Seen from Government

All the three informants acknowledge that *affiliation* was thought of as helping the sector in its new stage of establishment. My interaction with the three informants reveals that the word 'affiliation' seems to be used at the highest levels of Government to cover all sorts of collaboration between local PHEIs and foreign international partners.

It was only when pressed by me that there was discussion about the different approaches evidenced in Stage 2. To this end, 'affiliation' as put by one informant

'Could be cooperation, it could be borrowing, it could be using expertise – so there are three levels.' (G3)

Affiliation for this group is seen as including the other forms: *cooperation*, *franchise* and *consultancy*. Obviously this perception does not align with the meanings that emerged earlier in the three case studies, where *cooperation* was seen as different from *affiliation*.

Similarly, it is different from the understanding established by the MoHE, whereby *consultancy* could be considered *cooperation* and not *affiliation*. This highlights a pressing need to define and set boundaries to the terms used in order to establish consistency, especially in light of the current situation in which HEIs are given the freedom to decide on partners and the approaches they want to use, causing the confusion expressed by informant M1 in the last section.

7.3.3 Rationales, Original Intentions and Expectations

G3 points out that Oman is a developing country with the potential to attract many international partners who are looking for opportunities outside their own contexts:

'Oman is a developing country and the amount of competition in a developed country is huge but in a developing country there are a lot of ***opportunities especially in research****.'* (G3)

G2 placed heavy emphasis on Oman's unique context, which is peaceful and diverse compared to other countries.

Since Oman is a country that appears tempting to some people from abroad, due to the opportunities it provides, the informants realize that profit-making is a rationale for a partner to come to Oman, though perhaps at a cost to Oman itself:

'Many of international partners would come after money. They might even come to sell you books that are irrelevant and even outdated.' (G1)

Nevertheless, G2 believes that it is not all about profit:

'In a neighbour country, bringing the best is not working with all the incentives they offer. The salary of a faculty is 25% more if he goes there, no taxes, free housing, and insurance. Still, people don't want to come…. It was very difficult because the level you want is already established with them (universities in developed countries). They (universities in developed countries) have their own PhD students. They have their programmes, their own grants. They will tell you what more can you give me?'

However, when it comes to rationales in the Omani context, all three key informants confirm that TNHE was thought of at times when the HE sector was newly established. There was a need to build capacity and assure quality.

'The main reason behind it (affiliation) is that HEIs are newly established and they wanted good programmes.' (G3)

For Interviewee G1, in addition to the motives mentioned above, having a partner also gives credibility to the HEI:

'Private higher education started late in Oman, in 1994. There was no specialized body to advise the government or private education sector. The objective of academic partnerships was to give credibility to private higher education and also to put them with recognized accredited universities.' (G 1)

Interviewee G3 highlights the responsibility of the founders in influencing the direction of an educational institution and believes that rationales could be multiple and might go beyond the expected ones. The informant also stresses that quality education involves cost and requires a

vision and academic leadership to guide relevant decisions, including those related to partners – conditions that may not be available in PHE.

'Rationales (for affiliation) differ and they sit in the minds of the founders. It is influenced by the vision of the institution and to what extent they want to pay in return to what they get. It could be to attract students, wanting to start big, to say that we have started with highly accredited programmes.... If you really have a vision for quality, then look for quality. Yes, you can bring people from other countries but bring good ones. It is all about being selective of good minds that build. Unfortunately, that is not happening in private HE because it is run by merchants, who want to get money, who are sadly without the ability to judge educational expertise.' (G3)

G1 expresses the view that introducing private education seems to (unexpectedly) alter the fundamental values of education, causing shifts and changes that apparently extend to the inclusion of affiliation.

'When private higher education was given the permission to contribute to education in Oman, the main purpose was that we become like other countries that perceives education as a human right and as a social service. Profit was not the main purpose of higher education and by no mean considered in education.... Unfortunately, businessmen came on board and along came the understanding of profit.' (G1)

Generating revenue is already identified as a rationale for seeking partnerships in Stage 2 in C1 and C2 mainly. It is also recognized in Stage 3 as well, however, differently. Warnings against the domination of profit seeking seem to be in line with what Interviewee M1 mentioned. It reflects the problem of losing sight of the main intention behind education as a public good, and turning it into a commodity. It also points out the impact of business views overshadowing education, especially when businessmen, also referred to by the informants in MoHE as *investors*, may take decisions based on cost and profit that are not necessarily consistent or compatible with the view of education as a human right for all or as a public good. This profit orientation contradicts Article 1 of the Royal Decree No. 41/99, the ordinance providing for private universities, which emphasizes that their' main objective should not be profit-making. Instead, as Article 4 of the same decree indicates, they should aim to contribute to the improvement and promotion of education by offering courses in modern academic specializations and providing competencies in diverse fields.

This principle is further supported by G2, who believes that business values aggravate the situation, given that the sector is still premature and lacks a solid foundation both intellectually and even in infrastructure. Altogether, this situation could attract the wrong partners:

'They don't have the basic infrastructure nor the mental intellectual critical mass to make a university and it is for business. Once you think of business, you will get any help and there are many people in the market who will respond to you but it will be artificial.'

G1 explains that this happened despite government efforts to support the sector in different ways including financially:

'You are aware that the government has been generous and provided these institutions with different grants of O.R.17 million and further 3 million. They were also given lands for construction and given students to study in their organizations. The country was generous in this regard in order to lift the financial burden off their shoulders. Yet, it became about business.'

When we link such statements to the view expressed earlier in the MoHE regarding affiliation becoming commercialized, they seem to provide a background to and explanation of why commercialization might have occurred. The same concern was expressed earlier, especially in C1 and C2, in the category of organizational challenges, and the same apprehension was behind C3's deciding not to affiliate with others due to their understanding that such a move is driven by profit and commercial interests. With that in mind, the question remains as to whether commercialization is only linked to *affiliation*, inasmuch as using a partner for purposes of promotion and reputation can also be achieved through *cooperation* – which again may not be the most useful thing for a local HEI.

All in all, the rationales given by the government interviewees regarding motives behind seeking TNHE partnerships are mainly generating revenue, capacity building, assuring quality and giving credibility to the sector. These rationales align with the ones already identified by the interviewees from the MoHE. However, the rationale related to revenue generation appears to be a concern as there is the risk of this rationale overshadowing other rationales probably due to the nature of PHEIs being owned by investors.

7.3.4 Efficacy, Success, Challenges and Concerns

Factors contributing to the success of partnerships seem to be perceived mainly at an organizational level in terms of management. They are linked with the points mentioned earlier regarding roles, responsibility, focus of efforts, and readiness to pursue quality education.

To begin with, G3 acknowledges the diverse forms in which TNHE exists in Oman. Moreover, this interviewee highlights that partners play different roles depending on the scope of collaboration and agreement:

'The role of an affiliate varies depending on the scale of the agreement and it changes accordingly. They can be monitors, planners, executers, mentors. It depends again on whether it is a full programme, consultancy, cooperation, MoU.'

Similarly, G2 acknowledges the benefits of having a partner, but stresses the point made above regarding entering into a partnership with the right intentions if it is to succeed:

'Partners help to improve the capabilities in research and teaching but you need to define what kind of affiliation that you need and how it can help you. If it is meant only for image-enhancing and reputation, then even if the selection is good, the intention then is not good. So you can affiliate with Oxford to bring reputation and image but that is a mirage, false thing, so the intention is important and needs to be right from both sides.' (G2)

This calls for a policy of not taking things at face value, in the sense that even affiliation with those who are perceived as the best in their fields could be undertaken for the wrong reasons. This seems to be in line with the analysis in Chapter 6 regarding the need to identify the right reasons for seeking affiliation. It also supports the conclusion of informants in C1, that an affiliate might engage a local HEI in unrewarding activities if affiliation is not for genuine reasons that revolve around teaching and research.

That being said, they all agree that a good partner is one who does not fall into this category, but who maintains ethical and academic integrity:

'A good partner is the one who does not run behind money, one who puts their own name and reputation as a main priority. Also I would be a good quality partner if I only accept offers and affiliate with those who can fulfil my requirements.'

This is in line with the qualities mentioned by some informants in Stage 2. Such expectations of good partners suggest a possible conflict and tension. In a sector that is likely to be influenced by revenue-making motives due to reliance on investors, as suggested earlier, to what extent is it realistic to assume that partners would not have the same motive, and that other motives, such as helping others to build capacity, would always be the incentive to enter into partnerships in Oman?

G1 places learners at the heart of partnership and believes that success is linked to regarding learners, rather than anything else, as the starting point of a partnership:

'Affiliates and the local HE, before they start anything, they should study the level of students, the requirements for students to develop and how to help them stand on their feet. Then and only then, they will be able to succeed.'

All stakeholders agree that HEIs are not benefitting from partnerships in general due to lack of clarity and systematic planning:

'We are unable to utilize affiliation effectively because we don't have strategies to do that. Strategy is a way of thinking and has a human element in it. It is your understanding of the whole environment surrounding you. You need to shift, evaluate, estimate and change. Also because we don't know what we want from affiliates. Knowing what we want from them means we started with a vision for ourselves. The agreements with them are all about having broad overarching areas mentioning areas of cooperation without having any further details because HEIs are not sure what exactly they want. If you don't know, how do you expect affiliates to give you that?' (G3)

To conclude, efficacy and success factors from the point of view of the government interviewees is associated with the extent to which partners could make a difference to PHEIs. This is seen in terms of what they can achieve at the level of improving skills, contributing to research, teaching and learning. While the focus here seems on expectations from partners, the interviewees of MoHE as we have seen above, efficacy has to do expectations from PHEIs. This is seen in terms of attention given to PHEIs motivations behind seeking partnerships, for example. True intentions that go beyond the desire of achieving profit and proper utilization of partners, according to the interviewees, should be a prioritized. Such perceptions do not necessarily reflect contradiction. They could be seen as reflecting a suggestion that the two parties actually complement each other and that the responsibility for the relationship is shared.

As for challenges and concerns, one key challenge, according to G2, is related to a common misconception about accreditation and what it can really offer. The interviewee explains that selecting programmes based on accreditation is not enough and is inappropriate because it involves formalities that are not necessarily beneficial.

'Accreditation is only a process where you fill forms and do self-evaluation and ask questions through interviews and surveys with faculty and students. It is a wrong impression that affiliation will help with accreditation. Affiliates bring you one or two people so what is their effect? Not much.' (G2)

This comment is in line with remarks made in Stage 1 regarding the inability of efforts focused on accreditation and quality assurance to make much difference to teaching and learning. However, accreditation, as we learnt in Part 1 of Stage 3, is the key motive for introducing TNHE in the form of *affiliations*.

Stakeholders also pointed out other challenges that are seen as having substantial impact at the academic as well as the organizational level. To begin with, all informants demonstrated high awareness of the impact of student intake on conversations surrounding TNHE, as put by G3:

'They can't bring a strong programme to comparatively, relatively weak students. I think within three to four years of experience and trial, the university would rethink affiliation again. Either to leave it aside and build their own programmes according to their circumstances, the market needs and the environment, or they will go for full affiliation where they will import programmes. Until then, the indicators are not clear to take a decision.'

This is consistent with statements made by the MoHE (M1) regarding changes in direction and intentions of TNHE affiliations as a result of student intake. Moreover, it suggests that the process involves trial and error until a decision is made on what form of TNHE is suitable for an HEI. A key issue arising here is related to the resources, costs (human as well as financial) and risks involved in this process.

Student intake is an important dimension of programme effectiveness. What's more, all interviewees comment on the current state of dealing with programmes that are not based on the Omani context. They agree that imported programmes do not go beyond a purchased, packaged product with a certain life expectancy and which may not even be suitable. Rather they call for knowledge that is deeply rooted in the culture and society and, most importantly, is indigenized.

'We have a boxed knowledge, baroque arsenal. It is a shiny box that is ready and they tell you open it and implement it. It looks nice. You say we apply it. Five years pass and it is not working. Why? Because it ***is not deep rooted*** *from the system itself so it loses a meaning after a while. The problem we have in our world here is that if we don't create the model ourselves, then someone else will come with a model.'* (G2)

'Education is not a commodity. Education serves purposes and profit is not one of these purposes. Education is not a supermarket with sealed products to pick and choose from. Education has to be planted in the society. HEIs need to ***indigenize education not import it.'*** **(G 1)**

Relevant to this issue is an observation made by G2, who feels that teaching and learning are not necessarily the area where HEIs are currently expending their energy. The reason is that the sector is still busy setting the infrastructure and may not have started to focus on the core operation of teaching and learning.

'Universities are still focusing on infrastructure but not on their teaching … teaching is very important, especially if there is no critical mass in the country of good graduate students.' (G2)

G1 voices a need to raise the level of teachers through licensing, in the same way that other professions do:

'Medical students have to be licensed to be able to practice medicine, engineers also go through tight standards. Why can't we apply the same to teachers? This is happening in other successful countries.'

G2 advocates placing students at the centre of HEIs, employing research to improve students' levels, and then finding what fits them best:

'Understand students first and then develop your programmes. This is where research can be very important aspect. If universities did research on their students, they would know exactly how to deal with them. Then they can teach them well … students who are weak in theoretical part could be good at practical parts. Universities should take that into consideration rather than filling them with theory. They should push them into practical aspects and training and also tailor programmes to make them enjoyable to students.'

Second, at an organizational level, a challenge that has been reported seems to be associated with the way the HEIs present themselves to partners and the impression they make, which affects the way partners react to them. For example, G2 warns that partners are unlikely to respond positively if local HEIs are associated with images that fall far short of a sincere desire to contribute intellectually:

'Affiliates will not take you seriously until you prove yourself. Affiliates may not have that scientific respect to you because they feel YOU will not rise to their level. They spent a lot of time and effort to reach to the level they are in now. So there will always be that gap of respect even in hiring people to come here. Affiliates want the money but don't want to appear next to someone who has oil money.' (G2)

This implies that HEIs have a responsibility in terms of the image and values they convey. This might have relevance to the importance of holding HEIs accountable for their missions, visions, values and operation: in other words, to the concept of fitness of purpose as explained in Chapter 3. Considering the fact that HEIs are run by investors rather than the state, this model might carry an image risk. However, a tension observed here is that HEIs are still young and seeking support, so meeting the expectations of partners might pose a challenge.

G3 warns that the relationship between HEIs is probably built on a mismatch. Local HEIs are still in the initiation stage and underdeveloped, in areas including those related to research. However, the partners selected are usually those with a high research profile; yet this strength is not utilized to improve the performance of local PHEIs:

'PHEIs do not go for research. Affiliates are used to research, which is their main task but our universities don't so it is time wasted for them. So no quality students and no research so why should they stay?'

Stakeholders' quotes suggest that the level of expectations of partnerships might affect its success. Partners might arrive with assumptions about students' quality and research capacity. The low quality of the students who form the majority of the student population might be regarded as a risk. Chances are that the relationship might end in disappointment, so they lose interest. Only those interested in profit will come, and initiate a programme without knowing who the students are and what might be offered them.

All three informants called for a focus on reviewing current agreements to see how clear they are and how expectations are set, in order to reduce risks and ambiguity:

'I would want the MoHE to have more control on agreements and MoUs and see really how they are utilized. Most probably, they are lying on shelves or drawers where people don't even know they exist.' (G3)

'MoHE as a monitoring body has to review agreements to ensure that HEIs do understand the accurate purpose of partnership and that they align understanding with implementation. If not, then they should be given time to modify agreements…. Since 1994, I think now the sector should know better than having agreements only on paper.' (G1)

Responsibility can also be observed in the way HEIs start to develop their own sources of income, rather than relying on the government for support, by coordinating and balancing core operations while finding innovative ways to generate income. It is also seen in the level of their contribution with research-based knowledge and in their engagement with the community and industry:

'There is teaching and learning, research and community service. Any HEI should not focus only on one. They should balance. If you focus on teaching and learning and face challenges, push them to research and look for alternatives and develop according to your culture. Private HEIs are supposed to bring income. If they cannot get money to run their programmes, they will be useless and go bankrupt.'

'They have to take research and community service into account from day 1. Research projects bring money, community service programmes bring money so no need to raise students' fees but have other resources for finance to cover your cost. If they provide community service programmes, they will have a role and a place in the community. If they have research, they will be involved across the market with the industry, with business and other organizations and will open a way for themselves and their future vision. All this will provide money to go back and develop teaching and learning.' (G3)

Another issue that was discussed with the Government interviewees is the challenge mentioned in Chapter 6 (section6.2.4) regarding voices that demand more guidance from the government on overall direction. Interviewees responded to the issue of guidance by stressing the need for HEIs to embrace more proactive approaches. Basing programmes on research and on meeting national needs receives considerable attention from informants at the higher levels of Government:

This also implies considering the sustainability of education and addressing the risk of losing a partner, with the impact of that development on existing institutions.

While holding PHEIs responsible for their direction and operation, all three Government interviewees admit that there is room for coordination of efforts, better communication and more provision of data between HEIs and policy-makers:

'Key players in the sector need to sit together and talk to private HE. Research Council, MoHE and OAAA. They need to listen to HEIs, challenges, difficulties and threats altogether and build a vision and a common strategy for PHE. Without that, I don't think we will be reaching anywhere.' (G2)

Finally, the Government interviewees were asked how they see the future of academic partnerships in Oman. Opinions varied depending on whether the perspective adapted is seeing partnerships as part of the globalization movement or simply a role that ends with the local universities demonstrating capacity building:

'I think it will increase. If the economic plans of the country divert from what they are now, then they will open a lot of opportunities for HE institutions and research centres to come over to Oman. It is a global world – with globalization so it is all about opportunities. You can't exist in isolation.' (G3)

'I disagree with the philosophy that says affiliation is here to stay. Cooperating with others is important in the whole world to exchange experience, exchange knowledge and exchange academic staff. It was necessary during times of need, during time of initiating and developing education in Oman. However, it should not continue forever.' (G1)

In addition, concerns were expressed about the longer-term sustainability of a model that is heavily reliant on affiliation, which entails the risk – for example – of losing a partner, for any one of a number of different reasons.

In terms of the distinctive key points emerging from the interviews with Government representatives, it became clear that there is a consensus around the importance of affiliation at present:

'*I believe that the focus should be on assuring the quality of graduates and their ability to contribute to the country. That is why affiliation should not be perceived as something imposed*

but as something that allows benefitting from the experiences of international universities, benefitting from exchanging academic staff and students in order to raise the level of higher education.' (G1)

However, the following concerns were also recognized:

- There is a need to ensure that PHEIs focus less on profit and more on their contribution to society
- A different funding model should be considered, e.g. introducing endowments and encouraging philanthropy
- At the same time, when dealing with partners, PHEIs need to pay more attention to ensuring that they get 'value for money'.

7.3.5 The Nature of TNHE – Views from Government

This section aims to report some important opinions at the level of the government, which are related to some of the common forms of TNHE partnership in the sector. They provide a good source for verifying and triangulating perceptions. The following section captures their opinions. Needless to say, these views may not cover all the available forms. However, they cover those available in the sample analysed in Stage 2 of the study:

***'Franchising** requires certain standards of the original university. If a local university cannot achieve the required standards for the programme, the partner may pull its programme and leave the university in trouble.'* (G3)

***'Franchising** is bringing a programme that has worked well somewhere else. You bring it and say we have this very good, well tested programme and we think it will work. We will manage it for you here for a number of years until you develop. This is what I call boxed knowledge because it is tested outside only, so you are finding external solutions for internal problems, which will never work. It is not deep-rooted. It is a borrowed, rented, sold programme.'* (G2)

'*I prefer the model where I develop my programme and then get someone experienced to verify and give me feedback*.' (G1)

***'Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)** can be successful provided that the support received takes into consideration the identity and individuality of an HEI and that is done properly to improve the management and academic aspect of an HEI.'* (G1)

***'MoU** will be heterogeneous not homogenous because each one (of partners) has his own experience and you will have a cocktail of experiences. It might not work because the approaches are different and levels of understanding are different, even the technical capabilities are different. I think you will have difficulties and possible arising conflicts. MoU is not legally binding. It only says that two parties agree that they will do this and this in this certain area for a certain period but then it vanishes. I think it is not a good approach because in many cases it is not worth the paper they sign on.'* (G2)

***'MoU** is frankly an advertising tool. Universities sign a lot of MoUs but the content of that MoU is what makes a difference. If it is not detailed and tailored to a specific criteria, it would be useless because it is only a general framework. Their problem also is stating "if meaning" meaning if we need you. So it is left to individuals, individual decisions and managerial decision. It is left to the yes and no. The stronger person to say yes or the stronger person to say no. Another problem is that they are not related to one programme. It is a cooperation issue on broad issue. It is at an arching level. It is not enough to sign MoU to say that university X needs help from University Y. However, at what level and to what extent we will get it? What are the conditions and on what basis? How much support? That is never stated in an MoU.*' (G3)

***'Secondment (visiting teams)** could help with research. The problem with them is cultural. A visiting team might look at you from their own perspective and according to their own culture, which is challenged by the culture of the local university. Newcomers might come to repeat what they have been doing in their own university. The question is does it suit the local university? Also, do you think that the university that runs you on secondment will give you its best people? If it is about learning, then it would be better to send someone to go there and learn by cross-posting for one year or two from the exact environment, to watch and observe, analyse, record, compare, contrast. When they come back, they come with a solid ground and more able to suggest and modify.'* (G3)

The views above reflect some interesting points. First, regarding *franchise*, it is described as 'boxed knowledge', perceived to carry a risk in case partners decide to cease provision and may not be context sensitive. These views are in line with the disadvantages associated with TNHE, as reflected in the literature (Jianxin, 2009; Ziguras and McBurnie, 2015; Donn and Al Manthari, 2010). However, while *franchise* is perceived as less than positive in C1, C2 and C3, the government view actually contradicts with the opinions seen in the MoHE; of *franchise* being associated with quality.

Second, the understanding regarding *MoUs* is that they may not result in full obligation and probably do not come with long-term commitment. In addition, they seem to carry risks related to conflict and inability to handle multiple partners. These opinions seem to align with the ones reported in Stage 2 and also those reported by the MoHE in Stage 3. In fact, voices (e.g. G3) indicate that due to their lack of clarity, *MoUs* should receive the same scrutiny from the supervising authorities as *affiliation* agreements.

Third, *secondments* are perceived to carry limitations related to cultural sensitivity. The visiting team might end up simply replicating their own experience rather than develop solutions based on the local contexts. Moreover, visiting teams might not be the best in terms of knowledge and experience. These opinions align with experiences reported in C1.

Having said that, these TNHE forms are going to be dealt with within an analytical framework in the following chapter.

7.3.6 Issues in TNHE: Suggested Solutions

Interviewees shared some thoughts and suggested the following solutions to deal with the current status of TNHE:

- Academic partnership need not be perceived as imposed, rather as a way to improve graduates:

  '*I believe that the focus should be on assuring the quality of graduates and their ability to contribute to the country. That is why affiliation should not be perceived as something imposed but as something that allows benefitting from the experiences of international universities, benefitting from exchanging academic staff and students in order to raise the level of higher education.'* (G1)

- There is a need to adopt other educational models that are perceived as less focused on profit and more on their contribution to society, for example, by introducing endowments as another source of income:

  '*PHE should not be for profit. If I had some money, I would use the endowment system and try to bring others to this through donations etc. I have this idea that I want to help the society with something useful, an endowed university. Many people would come and help if it is endowed university. Then you begin to see affiliations. I would build*

capacity gradually. I would use money to gradually build infrastructure and I would send people outside to get degrees.' (G2)

'*Philanthropy in Oman is not there. Those who are rich are not contributing to education. This is part of social responsibility.*' (G3)

- In terms of dealing with partners, HEIs need to be more aggressive in demanding a return on their investment and increased value for money:

'The quality they give you is the quality they think will be enough for you, above average. So they think they are contributing and it depends on the receiver if he accepts that or not. If you accept it fine. If you challenge it, you have to be ready to justify. So it depends on how you convince them that you are not happy with the quality you are given, and this applies to all the consultants coming to this part of the world.' (G2)

- Finally, education in Oman does not have to fit the stereotypical perception of education. It should be sustainable education based on Oman, for the welfare and happiness of the citizen. This links back to the consensus seen on the need to indigenize knowledge:

'Oman education should embrace and uncover culture and history of Oman and build on it. Oman is famous for its discoverers, risk takers, sailors, had a strong fleet, and established an empire in East Africa. Omanis could exist and live with others in harmony, Muslims and non-Muslims. All this should be embraced. Oman education should not prioritize research and technology and become materialistic. Look at the Scandinavian system that builds on culture and aims to have a happy citizen. I think Oman education philosophy should be to bring up a citizen who is happy, work with others and innovate. Innovation comes from a background. It is not enforced, otherwise you don't have sustainable system. From that you can draw policies and laws.' (G2)

7.4 Summary and Conclusion

Building on the outcomes of Stages 1 and (more significantly) 2, the interviews with policy- and decision-makers in Stage 3 explored the emergent themes of:

- The relationship between the concepts of *affiliation* and *cooperation*
- The varying rationales for pursuing *affiliation*

- Issues related to efficacy and success
- Challenges and concerns

When first introduced in the form of *affiliation*, Transnational Higher Education was meant to serve the purpose of assuring quality and capacity building in Omani higher education, particularly in the private higher education sector, However, as revealed in the analysis, the implementation of the policy revealed misinterpretation of original purposes and diversion from intended plans. This was influenced by different factors, mainly the nature of the private (HE) sector itself and the profit motive, which is seen in some cases as dominant, almost to the exclusion of other factors.

Concerns over this factor raise issues of possible longer-term risk to the HE sector as a whole, and have caused some reconsideration at Ministry/Governmental level as to whether capacity building should not be more of an internal rather than external matter. This is seen in Government voices calling for a policy of 'indigenizing knowledge', in a manner that is compatible with calls made by informants in Stage 2 for more consideration to to be given to the local context when it comes to curriculum and programmes. This is a point that will be revisited in the next chapter.

Despite a lack of consensus on definitions of the two concepts, *affiliation* and *cooperation*, interviewees from the Government and the MoHE seem to express more or less similar understandings of *cooperation*. Both Stage 2 and Stage 3 showed that *cooperation* is seen as focusing mainly on research activities, projects, services, and consultancy. Relationships and commitments are not seen as central to the same extent as in the case of *affiliation*.

The same agreement did not emerge in regard to *affiliation*, which seems to be more of a multidimensional concept. Ministry interviewees perceive it as limited to programmes and curricular content belonging to an international partner, whereas Government interviewees view it as including activities classified by Stage 2 interviewees as *cooperation*. The implications of such differences will be discussed within the broader framework of the following chapter.

Chapter 8: Discussion

8.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings set out in the two previous chapters in light of the quality imperatives for Higher Education in Oman, with particular regard to private sector higher education, using the lens provided by the concept of policy borrowing. The ultimate goal is to examine the impact of Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) in Oman as experienced and seen by a selection of two key stakeholder groups. These groups are (a) academic and nonacademic staff of three private sector higher education institutions and (b) policy and decision makers at the national level (three different bodies): the Ministry of Higher Education, the Supreme Council of Planning and the Education Council.

The five research questions at the centre of this thesis are:

1. What are the rationales behind transnational partnerships in higher education (at national and organizational level)?

2. What are the approaches experienced in each case institution? How do these vary and why?
3. How do academic staff informants in these institutions perceive and experience transnational partnerships and their efficacy?
4. How do they see transnational partnerships as a contribution to quality?
5. What are the implications of the current level of dependence on transnational partnerships on quality provision and on the educational development of the higher education sector in Oman, and what issues does the case raise regarding the practice of policy borrowing?

In what follows, I will first address the five research questions in view of the findings set out in the two previous chapters, and then consider what emerges in relation to the outcomes of both the documentary analysis carried out as part of my desk research and my reviews of the literature on TNHE, quality and policy borrowing.

At the outset, it is important to recognize the veracity of Knight's (2011, p. 21) observation (Chapter 4, Section 4.6) as relevant to the four modes of General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). They are: Mode 1: Cross-border supply, such as virtual education and ICT delivery. Mode 2: Consumption abroad, such as students studying abroad. Mode 3: Commercial presence, which takes the form of foreign-owned campuses and institutions where foreign investment is involved, as well as franchised programmes. Mode 4: Presence of foreign human capacity in the form of lecturers, researchers or professors working abroad. Knight asserts that these classifications of education services *'do not capture or reflect the fullness of cross-border education activity-development cooperation, academic partnerships, as well as commercial trade'*. However, they provide a useful point of reference and have been used as such.

That said, it is hoped that this study in some small way contributes to addressing the shortcomings acknowledged by Knight by providing rich, useful and informative data on the experience of a relatively small country wrestling in its own way with challenges in the sphere of higher education in the 'global village'.

8.2 Discussion of the Research Questions

As mentioned earlier, this research aims to explore Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) in Oman. Nationally, the TNHE phenomenon is explored in terms of its rationales, approaches, and efficacy and its contribution to ensuring quality and capacity building in higher education.

Placed in the sphere of policy, the implications for higher education of dependence on TNHE partnerships are also examined in light of policy borrowing.

As already indicated, these questions were explored in a series of in-depth interviews with a range of key informants from both the three selected case PHEIs and from Government.

8.2.1 Rationales

With reference to RQ 2: What are the rationales behind transnational partnership (at national and organizational level? The aim of this question is to find out more about the rationales behind the international affiliates' pursuit of international affiliations and also the rationales behind the involvement of the local PHEIs in TNHE (cross-border education).

To begin with, motives of partners are commented on by the interviewees in C1, C2 and C3. In Stage 2 interviews, the views of the key informants across the three different case universities seem to align when it comes to what is seen as motivating foreign partners to engage in academic partnerships. First, they emphasize the partners' rationale that the arrangement generates revenue. The second motive includes partners' desire for involvement in the internationalization of higher education. Third, they report partners' desire to help other countries build capacity. Fourth, they highlight the motive of seeking opportunities in a competitive market, and finally, they indicate a wish to promote cultural understanding.
As per Jianxin (2009), these five rationales appear to combine the 'pull' and 'push' factors. Generating revenue can be both a push and a pull factor at both organizational and national level. Shortage of funds is likely to 'push' HEIs to creatively find opportunities and use entrepreneurial skills to generate income (Marginson, 2003). For government, massification of education is key, compounded by a lack of resources/capacity, thereby 'pulling' universities in 'developed' countries to cross borders. In addition, however, internationalization can be seen as a 'push' factor, especially if influenced by policies and regulations at governmental level or at international level by trade liberalization agreements.

That being said, the case institution informants acknowledge that there are other reasons not necessarily linked to generating revenue, such as the (more altruistic) desire to help other countries develop and the need to promote cultural understanding, as suggested by Altbach and Knight (2007).

As for HEIs in Oman, analysis of the interview data from Stage 2 analysis reveals that compliance with MoHE rules and regulation is considered by the interviewees to be a key motive for pursuing academic partnerships.

In addition, all informants agreed on Omanization as a significant rationale for involving in TNHE, with TNHE expected to help equip graduates with skills in order to increase employability. Interviewees in C1, C2 and C3 also reported utilizing partnerships as a means of assuring quality, benchmarking and for overall improvement in their PHEIs.

Capacity building, as another reason for pursuing TNHE partnerships, was verified by the Stage 2 informants. In the institutions, interviewees expected TNHE partnerships to provide an opportunity to expand and diversify knowledge, guide them in the different stages of their development, enable cooperation with other international HEIs on certain projects, mainly research, provide them with advice and consultation during the early establishment of the HEI, and finally to shorten the learning cycle/experience through an opportunity to learn from best international practice.

However, at the institutional level, some rationales for involvement in TNHE are specific to each institutional context. For example, C1 and C2 reported rationales related to TNHE leading to students' comparability. Expectations were that TNHE partnerships would help getting students with the same or similar quality as their counterparts in the international partners' context. This rationale is not in line with literature. While interviewees speak of the comparability of *students*, Chapman and Al Barawani (2010) speak of the comparability of *student achievement*.

On the other hand, from the point of view of a provider, the focus on students might be different. For example, according to the *UK Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education: Collaborative Provision and Flexible and Distributed Learning* (2002), the focus is actually on *student experience*. The variations in rationales, perspectives and interpretations between the sender partner and the receiver are likely to create a conflict and dissatisfaction in their relationship.

Another context specific rationale is seen in C3. A closer look at the rationales reveals that fundamental rationales, decisions and choices for seeking partnerships have strong connections to its mission and vision. In this sense, rationales have consequences that determine the type of relationship with the partner.

Informants in C3 demonstrated a strong sense and understanding of the rationales behind partnership in forms limited to *cooperation*. They feel that *affiliation*, as an approach or as a form of partnership, conflicts with what they believe their university stands for. Furthermore,

they associate *affiliation* with inequality, as one partner is likely to gain and the other to lose, due to linking *affiliation* with profit-making.

Informants also believe that their viewpoint has attracted what they see as the right partners. Most importantly, philanthropic rationales complement those that C3 informants believe align best with their institution's value base.

What's more, internationalization is another context bound rationale seen in C3. As learnt in Chapter 4, HEIs that are involved in internationalization tend to demonstrate engagement in certain activities. In C3, *cooperation* opportunities not only prioritize research and patents but also encourage staff and student exchanges. These activities are in line with the literature as per Knight (2012).

Yet, the selective approach is not trouble-free, since maintaining a partner's interest and commitment on the basis of a narrow project approach seems to present a challenge. Furthermore, the presence of multiple partners under one roof, each collaborating within a small niche area, raises questions regarding the ability to coordinate and control the situation overall. And while research and patents are important, to what extent are Omani students benefitting? C3 sheds light on partnership in terms of guiding values and the purpose of education and thus brings forward critical questions.
In light of the above, we learn that the rationales presented vary in the sense that some of them are context-based while some others are grounded in values that reflect the direction of an organization. The question that arises in this context is whether these variations depict the original intention set at the national level.

Exploring this question further in Stage 3 of this study, the principal rationales at national level for encouraging TNHE in Oman were confirmed in the interviews carried out with key informants from the Ministry of Higher Education and from the Government. These were uniformly presented with an intention to assure quality and to build the capacity of the newly developed private HE sector. This is done within a wider strategy to increase the number of higher education places available, in response to a growing demand and perceived need for more graduates at the national level. Such a situation is not uncommon in 'developing' countries, but in the case of Oman, it has the added dimension of the educational system per se having only emerged from the 1970s onwards.

As a consequence of that added pressure, foreign partners were entrusted to fill the gap by providing accredited programmes with the necessary assurance of quality:

'Private higher education started late in Oman, in 1994. There was no specialized body to advise the government or private education sector. The objective of academic partnerships was to give credibility to private higher education and also to put them with recognized accredited universities.' (G1)

This is consistent with Newton's 2006 notion of TNHE as a *mechanism* focused on processes of accreditation, assessment and audit, and reflects a concern at Governmental level that the HE sector and its constituent institutions (here the PHEIs) may present problems in terms of quality. International academic partners are, in some cases, entrusted with at least part of the responsibility for assuring, maintaining and enhancing quality: arguably a responsibility that should rest with government and its (para-statal) agencies.

Moreover, charging foreign partners with this role aligns with Jeliazkova and Westerheijden's (2002) categorization in Chapter 3 of the phases of development of quality assurance in higher education. Lack of standards in the sector, as in Jeliazkova and Westerheijden's *phase one*, underlines serious doubts about an educational system. Moreover, combined with *phase two*, there is a need to demonstrate public accountability. Changes to HE in Oman, represented by privatization and increasing access, as is argued in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4, resulted in a paramount need for accountability, control and compliance. These three elements are key rationales for quality assurance especially at national levels, as per the arguments of Wilkinson and Al Hajri (2007).

However, while revenue generation was reported as a rationale by the interviewees in both Stage 2 and Stage 3, the same rationale is perceived differently. Stage 2 participants view revenue generation as one of other rationales behind pursuing TNHE partnerships. The community perception, as reported by the interviewees in Stage 2, is that international partners usually have high rank worldwide. Moreover, they are well established, experienced and their programmes are accredited.

The assumption is that PHEIs with partnerships have an advantage of attracting students and parents over those who do not and therefore, are likely to generate more income. Currently, this area could benefit from research as there are no available studies on such conclusions. However, Stage 3 interviewees who are representatives from the government and policy making authorities voiced concerns that revenue generation seems to overshadow other rationales. The same is reflected also in the *Challenges and Concerns* reported in TNHE partnerships. Stage 3

informants warn that profit rationales would impact decisions related to the type of TNHE pursued and the benefits gained from partners.

Differences not only in rationales but also the priorities and the emphasis placed on the same rationales is another issue resulting from analyzing rationales. Stakeholders' apprehension that profit motives threaten academic quality is evident in literature (Currie, 2005; O'Kane, 2001).

To conclude, rationales for pursuing TNHE are various. International partners' 'pushing' rationales could be different from local PHEIs 'pulling' rationales. At the level of PHEIs investigated, some rationales are common and reflect original intentions at the government level. However, other rationales are context based and may at a certain point carry conflicting interpretations not only with policy makers but also with international partners. There exists a need to recognize the potential of TNHE partnerships without compromising academic quality and capacity building.

8.2.2 Approaches Experienced and Their Variations

With reference to RQ 2: What are the approaches experienced in each case institution? How do these vary and why?, I approach this Question through the two themes emerging from Stage 2: *Affiliation* and *cooperation*.

Analysis of Stage 2 data in Chapter 6 revealed that TNHE is experienced differently in different contexts. Such variations help in understanding the specific situation of each context in relation to the phenomenon of TNHE. In turn they help to identify two key terms, *affiliation* and *collaboration*, and to see these variously as two stages: as a phase in an institution's development and progression, and perhaps as a model linked to certain key principles and rationales. Below, I explore these two dimensions.

8.2.2.1 *Affiliation*

A) *Affiliation* as a Stage

Affiliation can be considered a **first stage** in the development of a local Omani PHEI. A newly established HEI depends heavily on a partner for guidance, advice, instruction and support. A partner is perceived as experienced, knowledgeable and capable of imparting knowledge. The local HEI by contrast is considered new, young, inexperienced and in need of support to build knowledge and capacity.

During this time of initial capacity building, local HEIs are usually not in a position to take decisions. On the contrary, their lack of experience renders the partner, who is privileged by the power of knowledge, the primary decision maker. Therefore, power and authority lie considerably with the latter. Relationships are noticeably formal rather than informal. Communication, thus, is seen to take place principally in one direction, from the partner to the local HEI. Most importantly, *affiliation* is associated with importing the partner's product in the form of a programme and/or certificates.

Informants acknowledge some benefits from this first stage of *affiliation*. For example, they perceive value in having another (authoritative) party lay the foundation for systems, monitor performance and, when necessary, question practice in a supervisory role. In other words, the local HEI becomes accountable to another experienced partner during the early stages of capacity building.

While C1 demonstrates the above characteristics, the situation differs slightly in C2, which regards affiliation as a *second* stage preceded by a *basic* stage called *franchise*.

In C2, an HEI starts with *franchise*, which shares many of the characteristics of *affiliation* mentioned in relation to C1. At this point, it is worth mentioning that C1 considers the *franchise* arrangements to be included as part of *affiliation*. However, C2 regards *franchise* as a basic, lower-level arrangement coming below *affiliation*.

To add to the complexity of the situation, *franchise* in C2 is not found in one form. Instead, it operates in different ways, depending on how a partner works and supports a local HEI. For example, a partner can operate as passively as to merely issue a certificate, or can be influential, exerting visible control and authority in decision-making. In such cases, power and authority lie considerably with the partner who in effect *commands* and expects compliance.

A typical form of *franchise* is seen when a partner owns a programme but teaches it through the local HEI, with programme content and delivery usually involved. Yet, it is observed that *franchise* is associated with rationales related to promotion, that is, with trying to come across as a quality institution by capitalizing on the partner's name and thereby increasing revenue. In this way, it is not necessarily seen as carrying value in terms of transferring knowledge and good practice to the local HEI.

Affiliation as a **second stage**: relationship with the partner changes as the local HEI makes some progress and gains some experience. Such progress is reflected in greater acceptance of what a

local HEI might suggest. Therefore, communication becomes two-way, as there is exchange of information and ideas. There also appears to be more in the way of mutual respect.

Similarly, greater consideration is given to the local context and the relationship becomes more reciprocal. A key element in this stage is that a local HEI develops its own curriculum rather than importing one. In addition, the local HEI uses its own resources and expertise to develop its own programmes. An international partner's role changes from that of dictating to that of advising. Feedback and advice on locally developed curriculum and systems are received. A partner acts as a verifier and in some cases as a body that assures quality of provision. *Affiliation* in this sense is regarded as Stage 2, before the stage of full development, which is *cooperation*. The value of the partnership is seen in possession of an experienced *affiliation* partner, who can help assure fitness for purpose for the local HEI: that is, it can ensure that what they are doing is generally fit for the HEI's context, mission, vision and direction.

In cases C1 and C2 *affiliation* remains at a lower level than *cooperation* and is likely to be adopted by HEIs at early stages of development. HEIs may start with *affiliation* but aim to move away from this approach towards *cooperation*, which signals maturity, independence and autonomy.

Affiliation is perceived as less than positive due to its limitations, which are explored in more detail in what follows regarding RQs 3 and 4 below. Due to its many drawbacks, informants perceive the advantages of *affiliation* to be limited. Having a partner may attract parents and students and serve promotional purposes, but may be seen as failing to transform learners or institutions. In addition, under these circumstances, the hefty fees paid to a partner may not be seen as value for money.

B) *Affiliation* as a Model

This view does not consider *affiliation* as a phase in an HEI's progress and development. Rather, it links it to certain principles that contribute to shaping not only the identity of the HEI but also its mission. In other words, there is a more fundamental dimension attached to it, which may include moral/ethical aspects.

The fact that education has become a commodity due to economic and political factors (as seen in Chapters 3 and 4) is acknowledged at this point. Opinions on the perception of education as a product not only permeate the literature but are also prominently reflected in the Omani context, as per Chapter 6 and, in particular, Chapter 7 Part 2. Therefore, associating education

with profit-making may not be a key message that an HEI would want to send about itself, despite the need to generate revenue. C3 has demonstrated high awareness of *affiliation* as a stage. It was placed in a framework that interviewees see as contradicting the values and principles they represent. C3 believes that *affiliation* is a 'Not-for-Profit' model that is associated with commercial affiliation. Moreover, they believe that the majority of private HEIs, unlike them, are listed as companies and, hence, are expected to make a profit. In this way, they reflect the values mentioned above: seeking profit and treating education as a commodity.

Moreover, instead of perceiving the partner as a supporting factor advancing the local HEI and helping it build capacity, a partner seems to come across as an obstacle hindering progression. Attaching a local HEI to a partner is thought of as a challenge if a local HEI wants to develop its own identity and offerings. Having a partner seems to attract customers and is perceived positively by the community, so that attention is given to the partner's programmes instead to the locally developed ones. In the absence of a partner, the scenario might differ, but not necessarily in the local HEI's favour.

This speculation refers to the level of power and authority mentioned earlier. Moreover, it can be linked to the opinions voiced in cases C1 and C2, to the effect that partners do not necessarily contribute to capacity building by transferring knowledge, as will be considered under Themes 3 and 4. Linking a local HEI to a foreign partner seems to represent a risk. In other words, these concerns seem to point to the belief that *affiliation* serves the interests of partners more than those of local HEIs.

To summarize, the concept of 'affiliation' is multidimensional. It can be seen as a *stage* and it can be seen as a *model*. As a *stage* in the development of a HEI, *affiliation* is associated with transition and movement from an initiative dependent stage of establishment to a semi-dependent stage. Factors related to power and authority play a role in this stage. They influence the relationship between a PHEI and its partner. As a model, *affiliation* seems to represent certain value and reflect certain principles. These principles and values seem to guide subsequent decisions related to the type of relationship expected in TNHE. Most importantly, the concept in both definitions is influenced and shaped by the context.

Having said that, *affiliation* does not seem to be perceived positively by the interviewees in C1, C2 and C3.

While the evidence gathered in Stage 2 from the interviewees has resulted in rich understanding

of 'affiliation' in terms of a *stage* and a *model*, the evidence gathered from the interviewees in Stage 3 is not as strong. At best, the link to these concepts could be implied. Interviewees in the clearly recognize *affiliation* though with variations in understandings. However, MoHE interviewees imply using *affiliation* to help HEIs develop and build capacity. This implication suggests relevance to using *affiliation* as a *stage*. In addition, *affiliation* is seen as a method geared towards generating revenue. It was metaphorically described as 'boxed knowledge'. It can be inferred from this connotation that *affiliation* is linked to certain values and understanding and in this sense, could indirectly be relevant to seeing it as a *model*.

The same is applicable to the government interviewees.

This section has analytically looked at the concept of *affiliation*. The following section is going to do the same for the concept of *cooperation*.

8.2.2.2 *Cooperation*

A) *Cooperation* as a Stage

Generally, *cooperation* is considered a second stage in an HEI's development. It comes pursuant to *affiliation*. *Cooperation* suggests that an HEI has reached a certain level of development and maturity.

HEIs that have gone through the first stage of setting up an academic and administrative infrastructure, with help received through *affiliation* with partners, are likely to engage in other activities. These activities do not involve importing and/or offering others' programmes or certificates. Instead, they focus on research endeavours, projects and services that can be academic or non-academic.

Unlike *affiliation*, which is described by the MoHE informants as a '*deep commitment'*, *cooperation* represents a partnership that is not so deep. Instead, *cooperation* at the level of services and research is considered selective and less complicated.

One plausible explanation is related not only to the power and authority exercised by partners but also to the financial commitment. *Affiliations* are considered to cost significantly more than the costs involved in *cooperation*, given that, as mentioned in Chapter 2, local HEIs pay partners a considerable amount of money regularly throughout the period of partnership. Considering the cost (in time and effort as well as finance) the scope of a *cooperation* arrangement may not be perceived as burdensome. Extra advantages would be the ability to

choose partners on an ad-hoc basis, and probably the ease of terminating agreements.

Cooperation thus gives local HEIs more power and authority it needs, not to involve in such deep engagement with an authoritative (and sometimes demanding) partner. As initiators of 'what', 'who' and 'which country', who also have a say in 'how much', the relationship is established more on the local HEI's own terms. A foreign partner would play a role of advisor or consultant in an approach that ensures meeting the local HEI's demands, as and when needed. The impact extends to communication, which now flows in two directions.

In light of the above, *cooperation* is considered to be a selective approach adopted by an independent institution that is in a better position to exert control and has the power to take decisions. This description fits the perception in cases C1 and C2, despite C2 seeing it as Stage 3. A slight difference between C1 and C2 as regards *cooperation* is that C2 envisions more involvement of its staff as decision-makers and experts than does C1.

B) *Cooperation* as a Model

Case C3 has created a shift in the analysis by helping to unpack another layer of TNHE in Oman. *Cooperation* is seen differently in this HEI. While interviewees share the view that it implies maturity of the HEI and a high level of independence, as explained above, it seems to carry additional meanings. The fundamental difference is that *cooperation* here is viewed from a 'Non-profit' perspective. This view places society and contributions to society at the heart of its operation. There is a belief that the non-profit principle acts as a guiding philosophy impacting on the overall decision-making and direction of an institution.

C3 interviewees believe that, unlike *affiliation*, *cooperation* allows both the local HEI and the foreign partners to enter the relationship as equals. Equality means that both parties influence each other positively. Most importantly, each party has something that the other party would benefit from. It assumes that both parties have needs to fulfil, so there is a degree of exchange of knowledge, best practice and expertise to enable the institutions to complement each other. In this way, it is a healthy 'win-win' situation.

C3 supports *cooperation* and seems to object to getting involved in any activity associated with *affiliation*. C3 Interviewees explain that an HEI involved in *affiliation* runs the risk of being taken advantage of by the more 'experienced' partner, which seeks to serve its own best interest. Authoritative partners might impose unneeded and unwanted requirements, and sometimes

services and products, for the sake of getting more money rather than for the sake of building capacity or assuring quality.

C3 interviewees believe that this is a 'win-lose' relationship in which *affiliation* is not seen as embodying real values. It is seen as scratching the surface when programmes are only replicated in Oman. Interviewees voiced concerns that having the same programme in Oman is a mere synchronization of names and does not necessarily mean that the programme will achieve the same results as on the foreign partner's campus. Further, a programme could be taught differently and graduates could be of a different, probably lesser, quality.

C3 interviewees believe that HEIs continue to engage in *affiliation*, despite all its disadvantages, for purposes related to revenue generation and promotion. It is also believed to help (falsely) polish the HEI's image and to assist in gaining community trust.

One key issue that arises from consideration of the distinction that has emerged between *affiliation* and *cooperation*, as seen from the perspectives of the key informants, is the question of what makes an HEI mature. This issue may be interpreted through sub-questions related to the criteria that would allow a certain HEI to move from one approach to the other.

These questions were dominant in the third stage of data collection, mainly from the MoHE. The analysis reveals that at the time of data collection, there were no formal criteria by which an HEI could be classified as mature. The MoHE was looking into whether passing accreditation would be the key criterion to apply in future.

It also emerged that there were no criteria to allow an HEI to move from *affiliation* to *cooperation*. HEIs are given the freedom to choose the approach and the partner, provided that they abide by the rules and regulations of the MoHE. However, they are required to demonstrate accountability and justify and take responsibility for their choices to authorities such as the MoHE and OAAA. That being said, it was interesting that, even though C1, C2 and C3 were all less than two decades old, they all considered themselves to be mature and therefore, to merit the freedom to decide to move towards *cooperation*. This suggests that moving from one stage to another is based on self-perception and the HEI's decision.

To summarize, *cooperation* is similarly seen both as a model and as a stage. However, this distinction has emerged from the analysis of Stage 2 data informed with evidence gathered from the informants of C3. Regarding the alignment in understanding across Stage 2 and Stage 3,

the analysis of data gathered does not clearly point to the existence of such a distinction or of shared understanding with Stage 3 interviewees,

To conclude, consideration of the first theme to emerge from analysis of the data reveals that informants see TNHE as existing in two key forms: *affiliation* and *cooperation* (sometimes three if *franchise* is included as a separate category). Yet, this interpretation carries numerous assumptions. First, there is the assumption that TNHE is addressed in a systematic and organized way with an HEI passing through specific stages, with knowledge transfer and capacity building completely fulfilled in a certain stage and growth demonstrated in a subsequent stage. In this model, HEIs objectively decide to move from *affiliation* to *cooperation*. There are clear criteria and standards by which it is possible to judge where an HEI fits in the classifications seen in C1, C2 and C3. Moreover, assumptions can be discerned in terms of the behaviour expected of HEIs. For example, it is assumed that an HEI would take time to learn, everybody would be engaged in learning, cultural and institutional environments would support learning, and partners would be genuinely interested in developing local HEIs.

In a sector where HEIs are expected to have a certain amount of autonomy in order to operate, where should the government draw the line between autonomy and the need to comply with the overall policy and definitions, in other words, with fitness of purpose?

Moreover, wide use of partnership currently appears to be giving rise to multiple understandings of concepts, the opportunity for random choice of partners, and a broad opening for entry of multiple foreign systems to the HE sector in Oman.

In conclusion, the analysis revealed that the understanding of the concept of *affiliation* in Oman varies considerably from the definition adopted in the literature, as stated early in Chapter 6. In the literature, *affiliation* is used to refer to all sorts of partnership collaborations. It covers all types of study programmes, services, research and projects (Knight, 2005). However, as seen in Chapter 6, *affiliation* in Oman seems to exclude services, consultancy and research. Moreover, it could be perceived as *a stage* or as *a model*, a classification to which the literature makes no reference.

The above reveals that interpretations of TNHE could be inconsistent across different contexts, even within the same educational system. They might differ at a macro level as well as at a micro level. In terms of the Omani context, ambiguity and misunderstanding could result from the absence of a unified and consistent way of looking at TNHE.

To add to the above, as seen in Chapter 7, the MoHE gives the sector the freedom to choose partners as well as the form of partnership, the only substantive condition being that HEIs demonstrate the ability to manage and control these relationships.

A possible multiplicity of partners suggests that meanings and definitions are also likely to multiply depending on the different contexts, in this case HEIs. The rate at which partnerships are growing is startling. As a result, a challenge could emerge as to how to bring together the divergent directions of HEIs.

8.2.3 Experience, Efficacy and Success of TNHE

With reference to RQ 3: How do academic staff informants in these institutions perceive and experience transnational partnerships and their efficacy?, I address this question by referring to what emerged as the third theme in the data analysis, i.e. key factors contributing to the success of TNHE partnership**.** As seen in section 8.2.2 above, informants experienced TNHE in different forms, each one seemingly associated with a different meaning and different advantages and disadvantages.

Interviewees were asked about the roles affiliates played in their institutions, what they regarded as the roles of partners, the characteristics of successful partnerships, and the extent to which partners met expectations, with *value* and *quality* seen in terms of **fitness** (for purpose) and **clarity**. In other words, informants value a partnership that meets real needs and produces tangible results.

The concept of fitness (for purpose) is similarly seen in factors interviewees identified as key contributors to the success or otherwise of a partnership. Pursuing TNHE for the right reasons and the suitability of the partner and services for the local context are highly valued.

The importance of fitness (for purpose) follows from the importance of consequences. A success factor that is common across cases C1, C2 and C3 is clarity of purpose. In in other words, the genuine answer to simple questions: why this TNHE? Is *affiliation* or *cooperation* needed? Why a certain partner? What do we expect from this TNHE activity?

But while these questions seem simple, they are actually critical because they represent decisions taken at a strategic level. According to the OAAA audit document, strategic issues are classified as part of the first standard: *Governance and Management*. Accordingly strategy should be translated into a plan that is clearly linked to financial resources. Moreover, it is

expected that risks will be identified, taken into consideration and mitigated. Addressing TNHE at the level of planning is expected to produce positive results if done in a systematic, constructive way. However, given that *affiliation* is mandatory, HEIs might pursue a partnership without fully addressing the element of fitness (for purpose) properly; in addition, the sector is still working on many underdeveloped skills including those related to strategy and planning. Chances are that there will be trial and error, and that some expectations may not be met.

With that in mind, in case C1, fitness (for purpose) is debated in terms of whether it should be prioritized at a national level or at an institutional level. Voices varied in this regard: some see fitness (for purpose) in relation to the extent to which local context is taken into consideration, for instance, through contextualizing. Others see fitness (for purpose) in relation to students and the extent to which a partnership helped transform learners and learning. C1 informants perceived the effectiveness of a partnership to be linked to learners, because the impact of transformative learning extends to the impact on society as a whole. Transformation is seen in the behaviour, knowledge and attitude of learners. It seems that informants value the definition of quality that is related to transformation, as explained in Chapter 3 (Harvey, 1993 and 1995; Harvey and Green, 1993; Harvey, 2007). This account suggests that informants expect the partner's curriculum to contribute to the development of certain skills that have visible behavioural impact. Moreover, they expect that partners will engage local HEIs in activities that promote learning opportunities which equally help to transform students.

This links to criticisms seen in Chapter 2 regarding the unsatisfactory level of employment of Omani graduates, which is seen, in turn, in the high percentage of expatriates in the Omani workforce, as reported earlier.

The above expectations explain why the majority of interviewees regard as 'useless' *affiliations* that do not meet this need. In fact they believe that unless this impact is evident, then the partner is in fact serving his own interests and not those of the local HEI.

The same factor explains the frustration seen in case C1 of informants who expect a partner to identify the gap in practice and 'tell' them what to do, given that the partner is experienced and is supposed to help local HEIs build capacity. Managing from a distance is not seen as effective. Partners might dictate and offer suggestions that are not necessarily based on deep insight into the local context. This observation is shared across C1, C2 and C3 and appears further in Theme 4.

That being said, given the resources involved in partnership, as mentioned in Chapter 1 and 2, the HE sector is expected to be accountable for the funds received. However, TNHE is sought for the sake of building capacity and assuring quality of provision, accompanied by acknowledgement that the sector is immature, as seen in Theme 1. Yet, analysis of Stage 3 in Chapter 7 shows that stakeholders do hold the sector responsible for decisions. There seem to be contradictory expectations especially in the absence of a clear guiding and supporting system. Therefore, the potential for sending mixed messages to HEIs needs attention.
When it comes to discrepancies in expectations, I argued in Chapter 3 that, while developing countries are trying to set a foundation for and assure quality, developed countries have passed this stage, and now emphasize the enhancement and improvement of quality. The implications are that certain advanced principles are already integrated in the culture, belief and behaviours at sectoral and institutional levels. For example, principles such as self-reflection and professionalism are already established in the 'developed' world contexts. *Quality culture* is likely to be developed and nurtured, which is not the case in developing countries.

Interviewees in case C1 raised the issue of contextualization in a partnership. While contextualization is mainly relevant to *affiliation* activities, it could also be applicable to *cooperation* as well. This could be challenging, especially in cases where multiple partners are involved. One interviewee refers to lack of clarity concerning the 'ground reality' in Oman. This expression refers to social, economic and educational objectives that a programme is supposed to serve. In speaking thus, the person refers to fitness of purpose, meaning the extent to which the sector is working within a unified national framework of educational policy. This point links back to the demands voiced by the sector regarding the need for clarity and guidance. It is seen that some stakeholders in Stage 3 Part 2 acknowledge the need for more conversation at the sector's level and at the stakeholders' level to increase communication and data for the sector.

Again, fitness (for purpose) in case C3 is a subject raised in relation to teaching and learning. Despite the activities covered during a partner's visit, which are explained under Theme 4, informants expressed concern that having a partner means that certain behaviour should be evident. An example given is related to the accountability of the teaching faculty and students in terms of professionalism. Many informants believe that a partner only scratches the surface when its representatives visit, mainly doing routine paper checking. They are not seen as 'digging' into real issues and identifying problems to address. C2 informants expected a more substantial contribution from the partner in relation to gaps that need to be filled. In addition, concerns were voiced that partners do not give enough time to the local HEI and that distance causes them to forget all about the local HEI and its issues once they return home. Case C3

informants also demanded that the local context be taken into consideration, with value being seen in solutions that are tailor-made for the context and not simply copied from a partner's own context. What can be concluded is that what is perceived as adequate or suitable by way of quality assurance activities may not actually be appropriate for local needs.

Case C3 demonstrates factors specific to the form of TNHE they practise, which is cooperation. The selective approach in this case – which revolves around cooperation on research, projects, services and consultancy – entails capitalizing on personal professional relationships and the presence of certain individuals who are proactive and serious about working with local HEIs. Therefore, success factors are perceived as found less at organizational level and more at individual level. Individuals take the initiative to obtain approvals and follow up with the implementation of certain initiatives. Moreover, C3 emphasizes the need for compatibility of institutions in terms of vision and mission if an initiative is to succeed. Selection of a suitable partner which would increase the chances for success, together with expertise that aligns with the institution's desire to foster research in its context, are also crucial.

To summarize, efficacy in Stage 2 interviews is seen mainly in fitness (of purpose) and usefulness of a partner in terms of knowledge, experience, ability to help transform learners and being devoted and accessible. However, for the interviewees in the MoHE, it is seen mainly in the extent to which a partner could help 'stretch students'. In other words, emphasis seems to be placed on students and HEIs are expected to work with partners for the sake of advancing students, ensure having recognized qualification and ensure academic quality.
As of the Government interviewees, the understanding of TNHE efficacy seems to be aligning both with Stage 2 interviewees and MoHE interviewees. The government interviewees place emphasis on the partners and what they can offer to help local PHEIs in advancing areas such as leaning, teaching and research. In addition, the Government interviewees see the usefulness of partnership in the way it helps local PHEIs build capacity. The above reflects alignments in views and link to the original intentions of inviting international TNHE partnerships to build capacity and assure academic quality.

8.2.4 TNHE as Contributing to Quality

With reference to RQ 2: How do they see transnational partnerships as a contribution to quality? questions were asked about the visits of the foreign partner in order to gain insight into the perceived usefulness of partnerships. The following section will mainly focus on finding out the extent to which TNHE is useful in terms of both key dimension: capacity building and assuring quality.

To begin with, the activities involved in apartner's visit will be explored from the point of view of interviewees to see the extent to which the objective of assuring quality is actually achieved. Next, the different forms of TNHE will be explained within an analytical framework.
In *affiliation*-based approaches, activities include: providing curriculum (usually accredited in the home country), monitoring academic standards in terms of assessment method, verifying results in case initial marking is done in the local HEIs, (variably) selecting the academic staff involved in teaching, visiting the local campus, meeting staff and students to explore issues, checking documents such as course files, and delivering some workshops on certain topics of interest.

However, visits were reported as infrequent, not sufficient to cover problematic issues, failing to address real challenges, not based on the reality of actual delivery, not aiming to update and improve teaching methods and pedagogy, and not clarifying how to deal with unprepared students; altogether they seemed to be limited to routine paper checking. That said, the majority of the activities identified comply with the sending countries' codes such as the UK Quality Code, for example, although the requirement in that Code that *'The quality assurance of TNHE should include the UK approach to student engagement unless there are compelling reasons not to do so.'* (p. 4) is, as has been seen, problematic for the Omani case PHEIs.

As illustrated in Chapter 6 underr section 6.2.4, partnership is challenging in view of the barriers at different levels: national, cultural, academic, organizational, institutional, social and geographical. The dominant challenges and concerns, according to informants, appear to be academic and institutional, as explained earlier.

Academic challenges have so far continued to appear, in particular the challenge of unprepared students. Moreover there was an emphasis on the type of support received from partners, which was often considered unsatisfactory.

Institutional challenges are seen at government and management level in the HEIs. A key recurring challenge is lack of development of the ability to utilize and manage partners in order to systematically build capacity and maximize the benefits of partnership.

Moreover, analysis revealed that these barriers that surface in the sector lie atop other barriers that may not be so evident. Examples would be tensions and conflicts emerging as a result of (sometimes unspoken/undiscussed) expectations and lack of clarity of key concepts that play a role in a partnership.

To begin with, there are multiple tensions and conflicts arising in the sector. For example, affiliation as a reform policy is introduced to serve purposes related to accreditation, recognition, facilitation of mobility and delivery of added value to learners. Nevertheless, the analysis shows that the sector has negative opinions of affiliation. As explained by interviewees, even if adopted at the early establishment of an institution, it is either sought for monetary or promotion purposes or is little appreciated because of its limited impact,. Between the MoHE preference for and encouragement of affiliation and the PHEIs' resistance, there emerges room for conflict.

Second, at a national level, it was noted that informants demanded additional guidance and clarity from the government to help them take more suitable decisions on programmes, a factor which in turn impacts on their decisions regarding partnerships. Informants expressed the need for PHEIs to demonstrate initiative, independence, accountability and responsibility towards themselves and towards society. The question arising here is where to draw the line between guidance, support and autonomy? Where should the government emphasize control and where should it allow autonomy? How much guidance and detail should be available to the sector before holding it accountable for an unsatisfactory performance?

A third barrier is lack of clarity regarding key terms. For example, terms such as 'credible education', 'successful partnership', ' right experience', 'mature institution', have emerged repeatedly. Yet, there is no available information on how such terms are understood in reality. This opens the door for different interpretations that could conflict in view of the many stakeholders in the sector.

As to the question of the extent to which TNHE is a mechanism for capacity building and quality assurance, it appears that the stage of development and maturity of an institution is a key factor, a fundamental distinction lying in the point on the *affiliation/cooperation* continuum where a particular HEI might be found.

Power & Authority	Scope (Focus & Interest)
From the most affiliate focused/centred 	From low level (Instrumental, tangible, material gain) 

To the most HEI focused/centred	To high level (Philanthropic, intellectual, intangible gain)

Figure 10: TNHE: *Affiliation* & *Cooperation*

One might ask, how do partners vary in their practices, and how do these variations impact on quality assurance? These questions are relevant to the third research question, and in answering them, it is useful to look at how informants share their experiences and describe partners' approaches and methods of operation. Experiences in cases C1, C2 and C3 are collectively organized below to illustrate the different approaches as reported. Figure 1, which is part of my contribution to literature on TNHE, will provide a framework within which experiences are arranged, from the most affiliate-focused to the most local HEI-focused and from low/tangible level to high/intangible level.

The most basic form of TNHE reflects an affiliate who might appear to be providing a programme to a local HEI. However, there is no evidence of academic control or support for the local HEI and therefore, intentions might be focused on securing financial gain for the importer, with provision consisting of merely issuing certificates. Despite the affiliate being passive, it still has the power to issue the final certificate, thus rendering this approach ***affiliate-focused***.

In a second ***affiliate-focused*** approach, the affiliate is perceived as the party that grants a certificate for a given programme. Nevertheless, the affiliate tries to make sure that the programme meets the same standards as those taught in its own university. But the partner delegates responsibility to the local HEI and shows no desire to interfere in internal affairs. This approach is similarly criticized for its lack of value, since it doesn't provide the necessary support, and also for its inability to ensure quality and accountability for teaching and learning.

A third form consists of an affiliate being entrusted with handling of all aspects of an organization. Furthermore, the affiliate's own system and culture travel to the local HEI. This ***affiliate-focused*** approach moves beyond the approaches described above, with the partner being more active in the local HEI. This approach is appreciated for the knowledge and experience that an affiliate brings to the local context, and for the way it assures quality.

However, this approach is criticized for the likely irrelevance of its systems and solutions and for its lack of integration with the local culture.

Informants felt that there could be gaps in expectations that might affect *affiliations* negatively. Most importantly, this form is criticized for the possibility of benefits remaining at organizational level rather than conferring academic or individual knowledge at development level, thus compromising the essential professional development of individuals.
A fourth form of TNHE is also ***affiliate-focused*** but demonstrates greater support, control and follow-up at programme level than the approaches described above. This explains why informants in C1 and C2 consider it the most desirable form among those described so far. In other words, perceived benefits are recognized insofar as they are demonstrated at teaching level. Unlike the above approaches, this one follows a quality assurance method that is perceived as allowing greater academic and teaching accountability.

Yet, some informants felt that while the above process is commendable, they would shift the focus from programme to learners. They believe that quality is not necessarily measured by control over the process of doing things. Rather, it should be associated with students, their knowledge, and the extent to which an affiliation is capable of measuring gaps in their knowledge and behaviour, using methods other than traditional summative assessment.

Many informants worry that what is being imported seems to affect education in Oman negatively because these programmes are designed to sort out problems of other contexts, which they bring along when they travel to Oman. Few informants feel that this approach will work unless it is customized with the guidance of local expertise to suit the local context.

A fifth form is ***shared*** between the two parties because programmes are developed locally; however, the certificate requires the partner's approval of processes and procedures before being issued. The partner also gives some academic support.

A sixth form, identified by informants as *collaboration*, is ***HEI-focused***, as power lies completely in the hands of the local provider, giving it the freedom to choose partners and areas of collaboration. As seen in Chapter 6 under section 6.2.1, freedom of choice under a selective approach rather than a comprehensive one, as expressed by C1.10, allows opting for collaboration that meets the needs of the HEI. This is supposed to maximize benefits free from the weaknesses associated with affiliate-focused approaches. Freedom, thus, is one thing that differentiates a mature organization from a newly established and dependent one. This approach is seen in C2 and C3 as discussed in Chapter 6 under section 6.2.1. However, an important issue remains regarding the focus of affiliation. Maturity is associated with a focus on research. Key issues still arise here, regarding the extent to which teaching and learning are relevant to this

research and there are accountability and transparency in this core area before the institution moves towards research that is industry oriented.

A seventh form is also ***HEI-focused***, giving the HEI complete freedom and power, but with ethical approaches that seek education detached from profit and shareholders. It goes beyond the previous approach by reason of the ethical dimensions that underlie the choice and direction of affiliation, as seen in Chapter 6 in the discussion of C3. Despite this approach representing the highest intangible focus, key issues here, as revealed by earlier informants, remain similar to those of the approach described above in terms of justice rendered to students' learning and accountability in teaching, before research and patents become the aim.

As for whether or the extent to which TNHE is a mechanism for capacity building and quality assurance, as discussed above, affiliate-focused approaches come with their own set of problems. In the previous chapter, informants' concerns about important issues, such as the suitability of these programmes for the local context and their integration with the local Omani culture, were noted. Though customization of programmes is provided as a solution, it appears to be a challenge in itself as partners disagree on what it means and how to go about it. Others went beyond that to question the very fitness of these affiliate-focused approaches for the purpose of education in Oman. This suggests a need for the local HEI to step in and take a proactive part in the process.

A shared approach, as in the fifth form of partnership, seems to be a reasonable solution, with local HEIs developing their own material and getting an expert to look at processes and verify procedures. This suggestion implies that the experienced party is measuring progress against some criteria known to the local HEI, which make reference to their own context, since the ultimate goal is transferring knowledge and best practice. However, informants in all three cases report that they do not know much about their partners' contexts, have never visited them and are not aware of how they do things over there. Most importantly, some interviewees described visitors as not digging deeply enough to know the real issues, their only source of information being the reports they look at. This reveals concerns about reliability and validity when there are issues of transparency.

As for quality assurance, affiliation also varies in the methods it uses to achieve this. The best approaches mentioned above do comply with affiliation codes of practice that require partners to present evidence, demonstrate follow-up, make regular visits and document verification. Yet, the criticisms above reveal that the best approach fails to guarantee a partner's ability to ensure quality learning from a distance.

Having said that, local HEI-focused approaches to partnership might seem promising. The burden of dealing with an affiliate-focused approach is less in this case because the selective approach and the power to initiate and terminate collaboration in its different forms lies with the local HEI. However, with greater autonomy should come greater accountability.
In Chapter 6 (section 6.2.3), informants brought up important issues that are applicable here such as the ability to identify real needs, basing decisions on clarity of purpose, the ability to choose the right partners who can meet those needs, and, most importantly, the (local) ability to manage them and make sure that local HEIs get value for money.

8.2.5 TNHE, Quality and Policy Borrowing

With reference to RQ 2: What are the implications of the current level of dependence on transnational partnerships on quality provision and on the educational development of the higher education sector in Oman, and what issues does the case raise regarding the practice of policy borrowing?, I address this question in light of the work of Phillips and Ochs's (2003,) and Phillips and Ochs's (2004b) model in Figure 1.

I begin by considering the concept of 'policy borrowing' in Oman in light of both the evidence gathered in Stage 2 and Stage 3. Then, the significance of the three key dimensions: *intention*, *execution* and *outcomes* is considered at both the macro and micro levels.

Currently, 26 Omani PHEIs have partnerships with about 52 educational institutions in more than 15 countries. Partnerships cover various combinations of educational programmes, degrees, services, projects and products. Such dependency has implications for the development of higher education in Oman, the quality and relevance of provision and the student experience.

As per the analysis in Chapter 6 (Theme 1), *cooperation* is likely to increase given the associated meanings of 'maturity', 'development' and 'experience' that informants use to describe it. *Cooperation* could offer a competitive advantage in a sector that is witnessing the growth of HE. Another factor contributing to an increase in *cooperation* is community perception. Though a gain in community and customer trust is not reported in connection with *cooperation*, the fact remains that, as mentioned by informants in Stage 3, the name of a foreign partner appearing next to that of the local HEI is perceived as conferring credibility and reliability, regardless of the scope and capacity of the partner's operation. In light of such competition, sending messages of development and maturity to the community would give an

extra advantage. Moreover, the same factor is applicable when sending a positive message to potential partners.

However, *affiliation* is also likely to increase as it offers similar opportunities, despite the less than positive comments received from informants and concerns about such specific factors as the domination of (the foreign) partners, contextualization issues and questions regarding actual benefits received. These opportunities, as reported in Chapter 6 (section 6.2.2), are linked to promotion, credibility and trust, concerns that also reflect the HEIs' urge to satisfy community perceptions, as in the case of *cooperation*.

Competition will contribute further to increasing TNHE. While currently the private sector is relatively protected, given that partnerships are formed through local HEIs, this scenario is likely to change considering that Oman has signed the GATS Agreement. Accordingly, Oman is supposed to operate a free trade market and allow other countries to invest in Oman. This means that Generation 3 of TNHE, currently visible in neighbouring countries, is likely to emerge in Oman. Under such circumstances, provider mobility will increase substantially given the apparently widespread belief that Oman is a country that offers opportunities including significant revenue generation in a peaceful and stable environment.

That said, in Chapter 2 (section 2.6), it was seen that having a partner does not necessarily mean transferring knowledge and best practices to local HEIs, as is evident from the Quality Audit Reports of HEIs. The same situation is reflected in the challenges and concerns of interviewees in Stage 2. For example, in cases C1 and C2, interviewees expressed dissatisfaction that partners would not identify gaps and opportunities for improvement, beyond what they regularly and routinely do during visits. In addition, interviewees reported the inability of partners to create quality in its transformative meaning at learners' level.

In section 8.4, we saw that TNHE, regardless of the approach followed, carries limitations, especially at the level of teaching and learning. This was further confirmed by Stage 3 informants. Such conclusions raise concerns over the extent to which capacity is being built and quality is being assured.

To summarize, there seems therefore to be a gap that TNHE is not capable of filling despite its other perceived benefits. While TNHE's benefits are more evident at organizational level in terms of processes, benefits are likely to continue to be limited unless, as suggested by the Stage 3 analysis, it places students at the heart of TNHE. If not addressed, these limitations will create disappointment, as reported by interviewees in Stage 2, and undermine the benefits that TNHE

might offer. What's more, considering the criticism heard regarding the ability of the (still relatively young) sector to manage partners, risks extend to accountability to the community and public funds.

All the above gives more power to voices calling for indigenized knowledge and capacity building led from the inside.

The following section will continue to look the implications of dependence on TNHE. Moreover, it will shed light on some of the outcomes of this process.

8.2.5.1. Policy Borrowing as a Lens and the Outcomes of Its Applications in the Context of this Study.

In terms of the practice of policy borrowing and the two dimensions of policy, formulation and implementation, analysis of the data from Stages 2 and 3 of the research revealed that quality assurance and capacity building are the two key rationales behind mandating partnerships between private sector HEIs in Oman and 'internationally recognized' (i.e. foreign) universities.

These two rationales are confirmed from the evidence provided by the interviews, in alignment with the literature (for example, Wilkinson and Al Hajri, 2007; Al Barawani et al., 2011). As stated in Chapter 6 (section 6.2.2), quality assurance (QA) serves the purpose of compliance, comparability and benchmarking, together with regulation and control. However, when combined with capacity building, these characteristics also point to a desire to reform and improve.

In this sense, TNHE with its programmes, policies, services and administrative arrangements developed in different cultural, social and political contexts are utilized to influence development of the same features in another political context (Dolowiitz and March, 2000), as in the case of Oman.

With reference to Chapter 1 (Figure 1) regarding the Continuum of Educational Transfer by Phillips and Ochs (2004b), Oman as a high-income country, according to the classification of the World Trade Organization (2015), is unlikely to transfer or borrow policies as a result of factors falling within the right side of the continuum, which involve forcing. Degrees of forcing can be seen in countries that depend on donations and sponsorships, like some African countries.

Rather, as explained earlier, Oman, as is the case with the GCC countries, is likely to introduce and borrow educational initiatives through influence. Such influence could be from international agents who approach countries with academic products such as curriculum, textbooks, software, etc. Moreover, it could be introduced through the influence of international organizations, for example in reports issued by the World Trade Organization (WTO) or UNESCO, as seen in Chapter 1 (section 1.5.4). There is already evidence of influence being exerted on countries to fit a prescribed and dictated image of modern globalized education, Chapter 1 explains.

Placing Oman within the global context, it can be argued that education transfer and borrowing are **Introduced through Influence**. However, at a national level, policy borrowing seems to be deliberately decided at the national level in an attempt to learn from what is happening elsewhere, as well as to improve quality and enhance control and regulation, specifically in PHEIs.

In this sense, borrowing fits within the fourth level of Phillips and Ochs's (2004b) model, namely, **Borrowed Purposefully**. Moving down the hierarchy, we have seen that HEIs are likely to demonstrate borrowing that falls between the fourth level **(Borrowed Purposefully)**, coming after activities such as benchmarking, and the fifth level (**Introduced through Influence**), the influence being that of, say, international academic partners or the management of the HEI.

Against this backdrop, 'impulses' and preconditions for borrowing suggest that policy borrowing is likely to increase in response to dissatisfaction and to achieve improvements in Quality. However, as suggested by Donn and Al Manthari (2010), during this process of reacting to the status quo, the chances of introducing externally designed and often readymade products are considerable. This raises fundamental questions regarding relevance to context.

Analysis in Chapter 6 and 7 confirmed that TNHE in the form of *affiliation* has negative connotations because it is perceived as borrowed, unsuitable or, as described by Stage 3 (Part 2) informants G1 and G2, 'boxed knowledge', a 'baroque arsenal', a 'shiny box'. G1 also describes it as a 'supermarket with sealed products' and a 'commodity'.

The above suggests that borrowing is going to take different forms and different shapes and will take place at different levels. What is more, borrowing that results from advice from outside could be dangerous. Despite the genuine desire to improve and build capacity, the associated

risks could send the message that decisions for change are '*phony*' or may simply remain '*theoretical, an ambition without demonstrating effective implementation'*.

Chapter 6 clearly revealed different interpretations and definitions of the key concept of *affiliation* and *cooperation*. It also revealed different practices and variations in the implementation of the same policy, as suggested by Ham and Hill (1984). C1 has experienced affiliation and has suggested adopting a form of cooperation. However, C2 has experienced a different classification of franchise, affiliation, and is preparing to move to cooperation. C3 has been heavily involved in cooperation.

Therefore, in terms of **Policy Implementation**, this variation reflects the fact that a policy is value-laden (Taylor et al., 1997), which will inevitably cause issues and problems to arise, including some quite fundamental ones. While cases C1 and C2 were closer to embracing the policy, C3 revealed some resistance to applying it in the same way as was demonstrated in C1 and C2. Instead, they modified their approach by purposefully embracing cooperation.

According to Butler and Allen (2008), such variable behaviours are considered a form of *self-organizing systems* that result from reinterpreting a policy, so that the same policy is adopted and acted upon differently. Braun, Maguire and Ball (2010) support this approach of seeing the process as subject to interpretation. This view also helps to account for the additional rationales that appeared alongside quality assurance and capacity building. An example of these further rationales would be utilizing the policy for promotion purposes to attract more students and thus increase revenue. Other rationales are seen in C3, which has aimed at internationalization. In doing so, it seems to demonstrate a clear intention to take part in a globalized world, as seen in its mission and vision statements. While the initial intentions seem to revolve around academic programmes, as experienced in C1 and C2, C3 shows an intensive interest in research.

It is clear that C1, C2 and C3 have mixed elements of national policy with their own requirements. Obviously, under such circumstances, compliance becomes unpredictable considering that interaction with the policy no longer takes place on the surface. Instead, it travels downwards to different levels of the HEI including academics, administrators and students, generating more interpretations and opportunities for conflict and misunderstanding.

Such variation also reflects the power of contextual factors and the parties involved in the process, which shift and shape policy. For example, Stage 2 and Stage 3 revealed that factors such as students' quality and HEIs' decision-makers (investors) have influenced implementation, causing diversion from the original intentions and motives of the policy-

makers. Partners themselves are another influential contextual factor, having the ability, when some approaches are adopted, to decide the width and depth of interaction with the local HEIs. Moreover, they have their own interpretation of what quality means, how to assure quality and what their role might be, as explained in Chapter 6. Concepts such as 'autonomy', 'self-reflection', 'professional development', 'critical thinking', and 'professionalism' are likely to play a role in such interpretations by the international partners. Moreover, the same term might have a different meaning in each of the local contexts.

In light of the above, it is challenging to reach a conclusion that borrowing is likely to be internalized or indigenized in terms of quality improvement or enhancement, whether in curriculum (design, development, renewal) or in teaching, learning and assessment. Further studies are needed to measure the impact of various types of borrowing in relation to other dimensions, specifically perhaps the cultural, and its synthesis with existing systems.

8.3 Conclusion

To conclude, the introduction of TNHE in Oman was meant to serve multiple purposes: to regulate, reform and improve education in an innovative way. It was also introduced to converge and unite education in Oman with global education. This was seen in the types and capacities of partnerships demonstrated in Chapter 2. There were expectations and hopes that TNHE would positively contribute to the sector. However, there appear to be forces that might limit these ambitions and generate new realities in practice. With the speed of movement towards TNHE and the opening up of the local market to more partners, policy borrowing is likely to take place in forms that are not yet familiar. Different understandings, motives and forms for engaging in TNHE are likely to emerge as well.Whether the borrowing is concealed or explicit, it may pose threats to national identity and culture. In addition, it may carry the risk of preventing indigenization of policy in the absence of any bottom-up approach to policy formulation.

Chapter 9: Conclusions and Recommendations

9.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) in Oman. Though relatively new and fast-growing, TNHE is quite prominent in Private Higher Education Institutions in the Sultanate. The principal objective of the study was to investigate perceptions of staff involved in TNHE partnerships in three private, non-state universities in Oman. The study utilized the lens of policy borrowing to examine the phenomenon and incorporated a literature review on the two key dimensions of this research: Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) and Quality Assurance (QA).

Data were collected in three different stages: Stage 1 was a pilot study conducted in Summer 2012. Stage 2, the main research stage, was carried out in Spring 2013 and covered three private universities. Stage 3 was conducted in Winter 2013 and focused on eliciting the views of relevant key informants at governmental level. A qualitative approach was used to gather data through semi-structured interviews.

9.2 The Research Context Revisited

In considering the Conclusions and Recommendations arising from the research at the centre of this thesis, it is important to reiterate the importance of globalization as a potent force impacting on higher education in the early twenty-first century. Given that less than 50 years ago Oman was in effect a closed country with no formal education system and absolutely no higher education provision, the challenges and opportunities presented by the forces of globalization have – inevitably – been huge.

As early as 1990, Giddens argued that globalization links distant localities. What might appear local is in fact shaped by greater forces at the international and global level. The powerful and transformative internally driven changes that have occurred in Oman since 1970 should be viewed in light of the complex and dynamic interaction of nation states within the wider international framework. Such conceptualization helps us to appreciate the process of Oman's re-entry into the world community of nations.

Amongst the most powerful forces of change at the global level across the past fifty years, the merging of geo-politics with the pursuit of commercial competitive advantage by nations and by multinational enterprises (as argued for example by Michael Porter, 1980 and 1990) has impacted significantly on the countries of the Gulf Region, including Oman.

For Higher Education in Oman, for several different reasons, as explained in Chapter 2, these challenges have been met in part by the introduction of private sector and for-profit higher education provision. Private education provision was encouraged by the State and facilitated by the General Agreement on Trade in Service (GATS), a treaty of the World Trade Organization (WTO) that came into force in 1995. The overall goal of this treaty was to remove barriers to trade through liberalization, privatization, and marketization. Education and, as seen in Chapter 4 (section 4.2), Transnational Higher Education (TNHE) is a particular focus of such processes (Huang, 2007). Since Oman became a member of the WTO in 2000, TNHE has been a major force in higher education and has changed the landscape in Oman ever since.

In 2008, Oman's trade policy was subjected to a review by the WTO, a procedure that is applied to WTO members. In that report, the WTO acknowledges that the 'Oman Economic Vision 2020' will be achieved through three key strategies: privatization, diversification and human resource development. The *Oman Trade Policy Report* (2008, pp. 9-10) also states that Privatization has twin objectives:

'Reducing the role of the state in economic activity and fostering the development of an efficient and competitive private sector, unleashing its vigour and vitality thus contributing to overall efficiency and dynamism of the economy.'

The report goes on to explain that privatization, as a policy measure, *'has been adopted by the Government as part of the overall liberalization programme and diversification in the non-oil sector to broaden the base of the economy*'.

The *Oman Trade Policy Report* (2008, pp. 9-10) also states that economic diversification is seen as an appropriate strategy for reducing dependence on oil. Human resource development is necessary to upgrade the skills of Omani nationals:

'To keep abreast of technological changes, to meet the demands of a knowledge-based economy and of increasing globalization, has been and will continue to be a policy area of highest importance in Oman's development planning.'

The above seems to align with His Majesty the Sultan's statement to Oman's Council (2002): *'We have always affirmed, on various occasions, that the human being is the ultimate goal of the development process, and its instrument and means at the same time. The more effective this instrument is, the more capable it becomes of achieving targeted development. Thus we always call for the development of human resources, their scientific capabilities, technical skills and technological expertise in order to meet society's urgent requirements and needs, and to provide opportunities for those resources to fully contribute to the Blessed Renaissance witnessed by Oman in all walks of life.'*

With human resources seen as a focal point and effective instrument to help the country move towards meeting development targets, strategic shifts in the direction of education began to take place.

9.3 The Practice of Policy Borrowing, TNHE, and the Issue of Quality

In all this, it is important to note that Oman was 'advised', influenced (or perhaps pressured) by the relevant international authorities to privatize, and the consequent reduction in the role of the state was intentional. The impact of external forces also contributed to an increase in 'borrowed' initiatives. Whether in the form of practices, policies, educational products or ready-made solutions, such initiatives are perceived as helping Oman to move into the global era. However, as seen earlier, 'borrowing' is inevitably occurring in different forms and shapes and at different levels. The evidence gathered from this study (Stages 2 and 3) indicates that contextual factors are powerful and could increase the complexity of the process when, at times, they become a 'pushing' force having an impact on the implementation of the national agenda, probably limiting ambitions and creating emerging trends.

This factor has huge significance for a sector, in this case the Higher Education sector, which is principally seen as one serving the common good.

As mentioned above, TNHE has been seen as a key means to help equip Omani nationals with the skills required to realize the 2020 Vision. TNHE was seen and advocated by the Government of Oman and others as a key strategy with which to pursue its 2020 vision. Inviting – indeed requiring – partnerships with internationally recognized universities has been expected to bring diversity in terms of the programmes offered and to enhance not only the quantity but also the quality of provision in such areas as graduate skills and employability. The evidence

gathered in the course of the research at the centre of this thesis indicates some progress in this arena. The higher education sector is gaining experience, even if by trial and error. There is, however, significant room for improvement through creating platforms for sharing experiences, developing standards and guidelines specific to TNHE, especially in related areas, and adopting a systematic and strategic approach to managing capacity building, expectations and partners.

However, the same evidence, and in particular that which came to the fore in Stages 2 and 3 of the research investigation, suggests that as a matter of some urgency and of considerable importance, consideration should be given to establishing a specific overall national level of supervisory responsibility for TNHE provision in Oman.

Quality has emerged as a significant concern in relation to the current condition of Private Sector Higher Education provision in Oman. It is noteworthy that this is a concern shared by both the staff of the case institutions and by representatives of Government.

In the course of the research, it became clear that, while foreign partners might apply their own national (and sometimes international) codes and standards, these standards may not be sufficient or responsive to local HEIs needs and may not accommodate cultural differences

Addressing such a need, while maintaining an appropriate level of involvement with local partners who need time and effort invested in them, might constitute a challenge or even a risk and may require more resources than the foreign partner is willing to commit. Chances are that international partners would lean towards partnerships that consume minimum resources and generate maximum income, or – within any given partnership arrangement – would seek to use the lowest possible level of resources.

Student intake represents a key challenge in the HE sector in Oman generally. HEIs in general and PHEIs are in many cases wrestling with students who are academically under-prepared. Expectations are that partners will help the institutions make a difference to these students and produce quality graduates. However, there was insufficient evidence that this is happening.

As seen earlier, there is also a significant gap in relation to teaching and learning that academic partnerships may not succeed in bridging, particularly given that the responsibility for quality assurance in the area of teaching and learning lies mostly with the local HEIs. As a result, the efficacy of transnational partnerships in terms of the assurance and enhancement of quality needs to be reconsidered in this context.

A key challenge facing both the Omani educational sector and the responsible authorities, including those in charge of assuring quality and safeguarding local provision, is in their relation to standards that come with multiple partners. While care is taken to restrict foreign partners through selective measures such as ranking, restricting foreign existence in the local market is likely to remain a challenge.

In addition, institutional contextual factors seem to play a significant role in deciding the direction and form of TNHE. Thus, individual PHEIs are naturally going to interpret and react differently to the same policy. The ability of the MoHE to control the sector and ensure alignment is problematic, and this issue will be compounded by the expected increase in such partnerships in future.

It can be argued, therefore, that a policy of relying on foreign partners to bring quality and build capacity has its limitations and should be complemented with other measures to increase not only effectiveness and efficiency but also the opportunity to indigenize practices.

9.4 Final Conclusions and Recommendations

9.4.1 Conclusions

On reviewing my work, I believe it can be said that

1. In part, the distinctive contribution consists of documenting specifics of the Omani situation and enabling the voice of a key stakeholder group (staff of the PHEIs) to be heard, thus aiding understanding of both the specific situation and the more general phenomenon of which it is an instance.

2. There are wide concerns over the quality of some PHE provision in Oman and the evidence collected in this study helps to provide insight into some of the possible underlying causes of such concern.

3. There are, therefore, lessons in this research for the Government of Oman, for the associated para-statal organizations such as the OAAA, and for the HEIs themselves, both private (specifically) and public. To name a few, the need to reconsider the for-profit model in higher education considering its impact on decision making, especially when academic matters are involved. Mandating *affiliation* under the current circumstance is another thing to reconsider given the multiple tensions emerging in the analysis and the various interpretations of this affiliation policy, as seen in C1, C2 and

C3. Third, the need for measures to ensure that HEIs demonstrate value for money in their partnership. Finally, the need to establish a bottom-up approach where quality begins with having accountable professionals at higher education level.

4. The evidence collected suggests that in many respects *policy borrowing*, as a legitimate means of addressing a fundamental problem limited to only a few HE places in Oman, has given rise to unintended *policy transfer* in a number of areas. This could perhaps be due to lack of attention at the national level to *policy enactment* and to system-wide monitoring, review and evaluation.

   The stage of development that Oman's HE Quality System is currently engaged in has somehow led to an inevitable level of dependence on experts from other countries. Such dependence has been accompanied by a heavy focus on *standards* to ensure comparability and conformity (rather than a focus on *fitness for purpose*). This focus means that the wider quality agenda (perhaps of the nature of TQM and certainly in line with a philosophy of continuous improvement against a holistic vision of quality) has perhaps been obscured. Besides the enhancement not being part of the TNHE agenda, it has resulted in the concerns expressed by the key informants regarding capacity building and the quality of teaching and learning.

5. Hence, the demands for 'indigenization', which can be seen as the next phase of Omanization of higher education in the country, should in the first instance focus on a compulsory national programme of staff development for all academic staff in HEIs in the country. Such programmes need to be centred on the challenges of *affiliation* and *cooperation* and specifically on Quality Assurance, Quality Control, Quality Enhancement and improvements in teaching, support for learning, and assessment.

9.4.2 Recommendations

It is inevitable, as suggested at the start of this study, that I focus on the fields of policy and practice in my Recommendations, with most of these addressed to the responsible authorities in Oman.

1. Variations in definitions and practices within the sphere of TNHE partnerships require to be addressed in a more formal and systematic way. To ensure consistency and clarity, there is a need for explicit statements of perhaps tighter parameters, expectations and standards at the national level and the publication and wide dissemination of these in the form of manuals incorporating guidelines. The provision of such statements will

help to address the challenge of institutions' ability to manage foreign partners. It will also establish expectations for newly established HEIs as well as for more developed ones.

2. While TNHE is addressed at the level of governance and management in the OAAA standards, available information on partner management and agreements used should be more explicit and transparent.

3. There appears to be a need for a national authority to monitor TNHE partnerships. Such an authority could provide guidance and advice on how best to deal with partners and emerging challenges. It is necessary to ensure that PHEIs attend to research without undermining teaching and learning. Indeed, this need also exists in the state HEIs. Most importantly, there is a need to ensure that research contributes to better understanding of learners and aims at a more transformative impact on them.

4. There is a need for a dedicated platform for sharing best practices, discussing challenges, expectations, and direction, and promoting two-way communication not only among PHEIs but also with policy-makers. This could contribute towards clarifying perceptions around certain practices and could help address (less than positive) public perceptions of local PHEIs. Moreover, such a platform would contribute to transparency and ensure that policy is addressed at the level of implementation.

5. To address the issue of the quality of student intake, measures are needed to review student learning and promote the student learning experience effectively. In some countries, there are authorities entrusted with teaching and learning and with professional development of the faculty, such as the Higher Education Academy in the UK. Teaching certification needs to be considered.

6. The responsibility for providing quality education needs to be spread to other organizations rather than being limited to government. HEIs, especially those that have been longer established and have the capacity and resources to give guidance and support, need to take a more proactive role in serving the HE sector as a whole in relation to the issues that have emerged from this study, whether in terms of policy, QA or TNHE, through research, consultancy and conferences.

7. To address the need for guidance at national level, deliberately focused engagement with TNHE policy needs to take place at the level of the State Council and the Supreme

Planning Council, and the outcomes should be communicated to the relevant policy- and decision-making bodies. Planning and legislation should address capacity building and the knowledge economy in a strategic and systematic way.

8. There is a paramount need to strengthen state sector Higher Education and reconsider privatization to ensure that its potentially negative impacts are limited.

I cannot, however, conclude this thesis without making at least some recommendations for further research:

a. This research is qualitative. Further research adopting quantitative methods – perhaps within a mixed methods study – is required for the purpose of generalization.

b. This research places TNHE within the sphere of policy borrowing. Further research could look at TNHE in relation to the cultural dimension.

c. This study considers the receiver's point of view. Comparative research between sender and receiver would be informative.

d. Examination of the process of policy formulation could usefully be incorporated into further research – perhaps looking retrospectively at how certain decisions were made in order to better understand these and provide an insight into their effects.

e. A comprehensive national survey on TNHE covering all HEIs is required.

9.5 Conclusion

At the conclusion of this thesis, it is important for me to acknowledge that my understanding and knowledge have increased tremendously as a result of doing this PhD. As indicated in Chapter 1, the principal underlying motivation behind my decision to embark on PhD research at this stage of my career, with a family of four children and the challenge of moving them to another country for the duration of my study, along with spending three years away from my job, was my passion for professional development.

In this sense, my PhD experience has been a success. I now have a much better understanding not only of a wider range of practical and conceptual issues related to the current focus of my professional work, but also of the theories and discourse within and around it. I think that not

only do I now have much greater understanding of a wide range of closely inter-related aspects of the complex equation that is higher education in a globalized world, but also that I know more about the challenges facing higher education in my own country and similar countries.

Moreover, I have some understanding of the growing private, non-state segment of higher education.

Placing my research at the national level combined with a policy dimension has given me the ability to consider international and supra-national forces when trying to understand the complexity of issues in general and the issue of quality in particular. Exploring TNHE in Oman and how it exists, unpacking the concept of quality, specifically in the context of TNHE from the point of view of receivers, all through the lens of policy borrowing, has been rewarding. The triangle of TNHE, policy borrowing and quality has made my research unique and has helped in shaping my contribution. I hope that I can put this knowledge and understanding to good use in my own work in future, and particularly in relation to advancing higher education in Oman.

All that said, I hope I have also contributed in some small way to a more general knowledge and understanding of TNHE in Oman and to the literature on TNHE more generally.

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Annexure

A. The Five Different Approaches to Quality as a Concept

1. Harvey (2007) addresses this notion by pointing out that there are three basic variations of it. First, as an absolute concept, quality is seen as similar to terms such as *truth* or *beauty* in its nature: people know them and accept no compromise with their standards (Sallies & Hingley, 1991), yet they cannot really articulate them.

   As with *truth* or *beauty*, there is actually no clear criterion by which to judge quality. Quality is generally associated with excellence, rarity, exclusivity and expense. It is used to describe luxurious things meeting high standards, which reflect status and prestige of its owners. According to Pfeffer and Coote (1991), '*most of us admire it, many of us want it, few of us can afford it'*. Used in the higher educational system, it can refer specifically to élite/élitist institutions such as Cambridge and Oxford Universities, with their high standards that only a few people can access.

   In this meaning, quality is assumed to be internally embodied in higher education practice, so that *'the panels would recognize quality when they saw it'* (UFC, 1991, p. 5). Where it is assured at all, reputation and league tables would be considered.

   The second variation operationalizes excellence through applying standards. High standards, such as academic achievement criteria, are required to demonstrate or evidence excellence. Benchmarking plays a role in specifying components of excellence. A benchmark is a point of reference against which to compare inputs, processes and outcomes as a way of generating improvement (IIEP, 2011). Assuring excellent academic standards emphasizes possession of a system for monitoring standards, such as external examination and peer assessment of research, teaching and learning. In practice, such an approach is largely input-driven, the assumption being that having well-qualified staff and good facilities will result in attainment of the required standards.

   The **t**hird variation of quality as a concept still uses standards. However, unlike the use of standards that are high and difficult to achieve as in the second variation, in the third variation, quality criteria are designed to ensure that minimum standards correspond with a 'threshold definition' or 'benchmark quality', according to which only minimum standards and minimum benchmarking are assumed. In practice, the threshold standards approach to quality carries the implication that raising thresholds improves quality. Accreditation serves

the purpose of judging threshold standards.

2. This notion brings together two ideas: *zero defects* and *quality culture*. The focus is on the process and sets of specifications to be met as opposed to inputs and outputs. Quality as zero defects embodies a philosophy of prevention and means that things are done right the first time (Crosby, 1979, 1984). Intervention takes place in the input stage and during the process stage to prevent mistakes in the output, as there are predefined detailed standards to compare against in the course of seeking perfection. Standards are predefined specifications. While perfection seems to be a relative concept, quality in this context is gauged by consistency. The objective is to produce fault-free products through a focus on process. Quality is defined as conformance to standards. Applied as expected, standards will result in consistent outcomes. The zero defects approach requires a quality culture where responsibility for quality and error prevention at every stage becomes everyone's responsibility.

   Promoting quality in this context within a higher education setting requires delegation of responsibilities, trust and support to those engaged with students. It also requires a facilitative, supportive managerial infrastructure. Feedback from staff and students is a useful mechanism to ensure consistency. Quality audits and assessment processes address aspects of consistency and reliability.

   Quality as perfection or consistency may seem irrelevant to higher education, as it is not possible, nor is it meant, to produce identical graduates. In fact, education is expected to promote independent analytical thinking, critical thinking and innovation. However, it may still be relevant if applied to assessment, student support systems and information systems, all of which are expected to be consistent and reliable. At an organizational level, mechanisms such as ISO9000 aim to assure quality that is consistent and error-free.

3. In terms of Quality as fitness for/of purpose, Quality is judged on the extent to which a service or a product satisfies and fits its purpose (Crawford, 1991; Reynolds, 1986). Judgement here is on the output rather than the process. Scott (1996) asserts that adoption of this approach means that *'the institution says what it does, does what it promises and proves it to the third party'*.

   This is the definition probably used the most in higher education. There are different interpretations in this context: mission-based fitness for purpose and 'customer' satisfaction. Institutions primarily opt for mission-based fitness for purpose and define their own goals,

starting from the mission statement. Quality is then judged on the extent to which the set goals have been achieved.

There is more appreciation of the differences between institutions than with the previous definitions. Additionally, it is claimed that this approach gives high prominence to effectiveness and efficiency. For instance, quality of teaching could be linked to effectiveness and resources could be connected to efficiency. Moreover, it values customers' opinions and satisfaction with the products/services. It is argued that fitness for purpose is not actually a definition among many but actually includes almost all the others.

However, some (for example Westerheijden, 1998) criticize this as a goal-compliance approach, arguing that measurement of goal achievability should only come after questioning and establishing the relevance of the goal in the first place, which is fitness of purpose.

Fitness of purpose is about the relevance of the purpose, so it tends to engage with quality as being subject to external determinants of what is acceptable as a quality criterion. Moodie (1986) believes that 'fitness for purpose' is deceptive as he questions how this fitness is assessed and whose fitness is meant in the first place. Second, fitness for purpose as meeting customers' needs is another interpretation that is not problem-free. Based on the customer satisfaction principle, who is the customer: the one who uses it or the one who pays for it? What exactly is the student: a customer or a product? Are involved stakeholders, such as staff, also customers (Elton, 1992: CIHE, 1987)?

If students are considered customers, it can be argued that they are not fully and objectively capable of either specifying their educational needs or judging the quality of the teaching or learning support provided (Elton, 1992). What's more, in practice customers rarely specify individual choices. It is the producer who anticipates the needs and then mass-produces products and services according to available resources before turning to the customer to persuade him or her to take up the services or buy the products (Harvey & Green, 1993).

Fitness for purpose is usually measured through quality assessment procedures whereby institutions demonstrate that they fit the external specified standards, such as government and professional regulations. Accreditation also checks minimum compliance to externally imposed standards.

4. Quality as value for money implies promising quality products, services, provision or outcomes at a monetary cost (Schrock & Lefevre, 1988). Quality is seen as a return on investment (Harvey, 2006).

   Quality as value for money is often one of the key concepts that dominate the conversation when assuring the quality of HEIs (especially external assessment), due to the need to demonstrate accountability for public funds. HEIs are required to show ability to obtain maximum benefits from services and goods provided and acquired: universities are responsible for cost effectiveness. However, there is also an element of subjectivity in deciding on value for money. Value for money is often associated with efficiency and effectiveness, an association that is criticized by Fraser (1994) as carrying the risk of confusing quality with efficiency, since low cost may lead to the achievement of only low standards.

   In this approach, outputs are measured against inputs. This explains interest in feedback on programmes and institutional performance indicators (such as student retention).

5. Quality as transformation focuses on the cognitive and qualitative change achieved via transformation of students' understanding and attitudes throughout the course of study. Transformation refers to the empowerment and enhancement of students or the development of new knowledge (Harvey & Green, 1993). For institutions, it also refers to their ability to create environments that provide transformative learning and research. Quality is assured through a focus on *academic standards* and *standards of competence* (Harvey, 2007).

   Newby (1999) believes that this definition is problematic and that the higher education outcome represented in terms of intellectual capital is difficult to measure. Harvey (1995) also believes that there is a high level of subjectivity in notions of transformation and questions what this quality measure is trying to measure, based on the principle that if concepts cannot be measured then they cannot be improved.

   That said, advocates of this approach believe that the more an educational institution has an impact on students' personal development and knowledge, the more it can be considered outstanding. Emphasis is placed on enriching students' experiences in order to meet the requirements of future working life properly (Tam, 2001). This understanding of transformative quality promotes empowerment of students.

   HEIs thrive by achieving quality. Quality is expected in multiple spheres and its pursuit is

challenging as the various stakeholders may prioritize a certain sphere rather than another. Therefore, unless one pays attention to identifying, defining and making explicit the range of quality standards and how these are defined, one might risk losing sight of core requirements.

The multiplicity of definitions of quality in higher education reflects the same dilemma already seen in section 3.1 in regard to agreeing on a definition. Different stakeholders perceive and prioritize quality differently. Complexity is further compounded when quality, which, as clearly seen, is contested and vague, is considered in a transnational context. Reflecting on the Omani context, stakeholders not only comprise the many local groups that have an interest in higher education; they are now also international, each group having its own cultural and other contextual variations. With the growth of transnational higher education and increasing dependence on international affiliations, managing quality is likely to present a significant challenge.

According to the International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP, 2011, p. 10), *'It is not possible, therefore, to talk about quality as a single concept. Any definition of quality must be defined in terms of the context in which it is used'*.

To further complicate matters, there is also, as reflected in the literature, the dynamic of the interaction between *Quality as threshold* and *Quality as enhancement*. *Quality as threshold*, as mentioned earlier, is about defining specific norms and standards for institutions to cross in order to get certified or rated for meeting quality standards, such as national standards. In Europe, most countries apply minimum standards of generally expected knowledge skills for graduates and expect the higher education institutions not only to meet but to exceed them (Westerheijden, 1998).

Quality as enhancement refers to the imperative of constantly developing and raising quality at the institutional level.

Such terms and the discourse generated around them are now an integral feature of the higher education sector of Oman – in both policy and practice. Despite the hugely different histories of Oman and its GCC neighbours on one hand, and (say) the countries of the European Union on the other, there does appear on the face of it to be a certain degree of similarity between (a) the development trajectory of Oman as a country since 1970 along with the development of higher education in Oman, and (b) that which is outlined in the literature on the development of the discourse on the purposes of higher education and on

the development of the quality agenda in higher education in the 'developed' world. Oman's experience of national development, of modernization and of its higher education system in response to these forces may have taken place to date within a highly compressed timescale but many of the factors at play and issues that have to be dealt with seem similar to those encountered in the literature on the experience of countries such as the UK. In this respect, it is relevant to consider the role of public bodies charged with overseeing and promoting quality in higher education.

For the purpose of this research, the concept of 'fitness for purpose' would be used as a general description for 'quality'. Virtually all the other meanings can be interpreted within the broader framework of this definition. An educational goal that achieves its purpose can be 'fit for its purpose'. Similarly, if it succeeds in making the expected changes in students, seen as transformative, then it is also fit for its purpose.

B. Consent Form

International Academic Partnerships in Higher Education in Oman:

Samya Awadh, PhD Study

Consent Form

1. I understand that my participation is voluntary.

2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from this research at any stage without any consequences.

3. I understand that information will remain confidential and my identity will be anonymous.

4. I understand that information will be used for research purposes only.

5. I consent to being audio recorded to facilitate data transcription for the researcher, on the basis that this recording will not be made available to any third party and kept securely. Yes/No

I_____ hereby agree to participate in the research

Signature of participant _____ Date _____

C. Participant Information Collection Sheet

Name: _____

Age: _____

Gender: _____

Nationality:_____

Qualification:_____

Job Title: _____

Total Years of Experience: _____

Years of Experience in Oman: _____

Years of Experience in the current Organization: _____

Place of Interview: _____

Time of Interview: _____

Participant number (to be filled by researcher): _____

D. Researcher Information

Institute for Education, Community and Society
MORAY HOUSE SCHOOL of EDUCATION

The University of Edinburgh
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh EH8 8AQ

Telephone 0131 651 6120/6019
Fax 0131 651 6018
www.education.ed.ac.uk/institutes/ecs

Researcher Information

Introduction:

I am a researcher in Edinburgh University exploring higher educational professionals' experiences with international academic partnerships in higher education in Oman.

What is the purpose of this research?

My research aims to explore what people think about different issues related to international academic partnerships. It is based on sharing experiences and insights, resulting from their own experiences. The research hopes to contribute to a better understanding of the quality assurance of transnational higher education and to enhancement of this process.

Why have you been invited to participate in this research?

You have been invited because of your experience and involvement with international academic partnership/affiliations. You could be a manager, a decision maker or a member of the teaching staff with duties relevant to international partnerships/affiliations.

What happens to the information gathered?

Information gathered throughout the research is confidential and identity will remain withheld during data analysis. References to organizations and individuals will be removed and coded as well to protect participants. Data will be stored safely to ensure access of researcher and supervisor for research purposes only. You will receive a summary of findings at the end of data analysis.

What happens after reading this information sheet?

You will be provided with a consent form upon your confirmation of participation. Moreover, you will be contacted to set a suitable time for the interview.

Researcher contact details: Please don't hesitate to contact me regarding any further clarifications or questions: Email address: s1151931@sms.ed.ac.uk Phone number: 98555300 (Oman) , (0044) 7847488399 (UK)

E. Supervisor's Letter Supporting Student

Institute for Education, Community and Society
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The University of Edinburgh
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh EH8 8AQ

Telephone 0131 651 6120/6019
Fax 0131 651 6018
www.education.ed.ac.uk/institutes/ecs

March, 2013

Dear Chancellor
Re: Request for a meeting

Please find attached a letter from Mrs Samya Awadh who is a PhD student at the University of Edinburgh.

Mrs Samya is conducting research into quality assurance and academic partnership in Oman and would value speaking with you about this work. She would like to contact you when she is in Oman in the next week or so. This will be to make an appointment at a time of your convenience.

I hope that it will be possible for make time to meet Mrs Samya as it will be extremely important for her research and I am sure you will be interested to learn about her work.

With kind regards

Gari Donn
Dr Gari Donn
Supervisor PhD student
Director PG Programmes in International Education
University of Edinburgh
School of Education
Edinburgh
EH8 8JE

F. University Letter Supporting Student

15 February 2013

JKRS

Undergraduate Office
MORAY HOUSE SCHOOL of EDUCATION
The University of Edinburgh
Charteris Land
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh EH8 8AQ
Telephone 0131 650 1000
School Telephone 0131 651 6138
or direct dial 0131 651 6134
Fax 0131 651 6398
Email education.school@ed.ac.uk
Website www.education.ed.ac.uk
Jefferson.Shirley@ed.ac.uk

Re: Samya Awadh Malaqout Taroom – University of Edinburgh student

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to confirm that Samya Awadh Malaqout Taroom (Student number s1151931) is currently a fully matriculated full-time student in the Moray House School of Education at University of Edinburgh on the Education (PhD) Programme.

The programme started on 1st September 2011 and is scheduled to end on 31st August 2014.

I hope this is sufficient information for your purpose. However please contact me if you require any further clarification.

Yours sincerely

Jefferson Shirley
Student Support Officer
Moray House School of Education
Holyrood Road
Edinburgh
EH8 8AQ

G. Tables and Figures

	Organisation	Type of Organisation-Year of Operation	Affiliation	Country Partner	Fees (R.O.)	Examples of Programmes Offered
1	**A'Sharqiyah University**	University (Private) 10/11	• Oklahoma State University • Texas Technological University	• US • US	70 /credit hour	Diplomas (66 hours) and Bachelors (132 hours) (Accounting, Finance, Business Management, Applied Sciences)
					80 /credit hour	Diplomas (77 hours) and Bachelors (137 hours) (Engineering)
2	**Arab Open University**	University (Private) 07/08	• Open University	• UK	6400-6600	Diplomas, Bachelors (Information Technology, Business Administration, English Language and Literature, Business Studies)
					2769-4620	Masters (Educational Leadership, English, Instructional technology, MBA, Program Development)
3	**Dhofar University**	University (Private) 04/05	• American University of Beirut • Indian Institute of Technology-Allahabad • Indian Institute of Technology-Bombay	• Lebanon • India • India	70 R.O.-90 /credit hour	Diplomas, Bachelors (Commerce and Business Administration, Engineering)
					125 /credit hour	Masters (Arts, Education, Management, Information Technology, MBA)

4	**German University of Technology**	University (Private) 06/07	• RWTH Aachen University • University of Salzburg • Munich University of Applied Sciences • University of Applied Sciences-Stralsund	• Germany • Austria • Germany • Germany	2880-2940 / semester	Bachelors (Geosciences, Logistics, Urban Planning, Sustainable Tourism, Engineering)
					1900 / semester	Masters (Geosciences, Urban Planning)
5	**University of Nizwa**	University (Private) 04/05	• Martin-Luther University • Multimedia University • Northumbria University • Shahid Behishti University • The Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies-ANU • International Islamic University of Malaysia • Wayne County	• Germany • Malaysia • UK • Iran • Australia • Malaysia • US • Turkey • US • Turkey	66 – 90 / credit hour 990 - 1350 / semester	Diplomas and Bachelors (Accounting, Business Administration, Marketing, Management of Recreational Programs, Web Design, Operations management, Economics and Finance, Information Systems, Trade and Finance, Pharmacy, Nursing, Computer Science, Mathematics, Statistics, Physics, Chemistry, Biotechnology, Arabic, Translation, Education, Engineering, Architecture)
						Masters (Counseling, Education, English, TESOL, Chemistry)

			Community College • Marmara University • University of Wisconsin • Faith University			
6	**Sohar University**	University (Private) 01/02	• University of Oxford • Faith Sultan Mehmet Vakif University • Queensland University	• UK • Malaysia • Australia	125 - 137 /unit	Diplomas and Bachelors (Accountancy, Management, Marketing, Management Information System, Business and commercial Law, Computing and Information Technology, Engineering, Humanities and Social Sciences
					3712-7200	Masters (MBA, Education, Computer Science)
7	**University of Buraimi**	University (Private) 11/12	• IMC University of Applied Science Krems	• Austria	2000-3930 / year	Bachelor (Engineering- Civil and Mechanical, Health Sciences- Nursing and Pharmacy, Commerce- Law, Logistics, Business Administration, Export Oriented Management, MBA)
8	**Al Bayan College**	College (Private) 05/06	• Purdue University Calumet	• US	65 – 70 / credit hour	Diplomas and Bachelors (Media, English)
9	**Al Buraimi College**	University College (Private) 03/04	• California State University Northridge • Ain Shams University	• US • Egypt	55 – 65 / credit hour	Diplomas and Bachelors (English, Business, Computer Sciences, Law, Software Engineering)

10	**Al-Zahra College for Women**	College (Private) 99/00	• Al Ahliyya Amman University Hashemite	• Jordan	59 – 65 / credit hour	Diplomas and Bachelors (Laws, Software Engineering, Business Administration, English, Graphic Design, Translation)
					5400	Masters (MBA)
11	**Caledonian College of Engineering**	College (Private) 95/96	• Glasgow Caledonian University • University Vellore Institute of Technology	• UK • India	3050/ level	Diploma and Bachelors (Engineering)
					5000-6975	Masters (Construction, Engineering, Information Systems)
12	**Gulf College**	College (Private) 04/05	• Staffordshire University • University of Hull • University of Reading	• UK • UK • UK	1125/ quarter	Bachelors (Marketing Management, Tourism, Computer Science, Accounting, Business Economics, Finance, Information System)
						Masters (MBA)
13	**International College of Engineering & Management**	College (Private) 97/98	• University of Central Lancashire	• UK	3000 / year	Diplomas and Bachelors (Mechanical Engineering, Health Safety and Environmental Management, Fire Safety, Facilities Management)
14	**International Maritime College Oman**	College (Private) 05/06	• STC-Group Rotterdam	• Netherlands	3675/ year	Diplomas and Bachelors (Maritime Navigation, Marine Engineering, Shipping Management, Process Operations)
15	**Majan College**	University College (Private) 95/96	• University of	• UK • UK • UK	2000 / year	Diplomas and Bachelors (Accounting, Finance, Business Administration, Tourism, Human

			Bedfordshire • University of Leeds • University of Glasgow • Islamic Sciences University of Malaysia	• Malaysia		Resource, Information Systems, E-commerce, Information Technology, English)
					5750-6229 (2 years)	Masters (MBA, Computer Science, English, Human Resource)
16	**Mazoon College**	College (Private) 99/00	• Missouri University of Science and Technology • Banasthali - Vidyapiyh	• US • India	65 – 70 / credit hour	Bachelors (Accounting, Economics, Business Administration, Computer Science, English, Psychology)
					5400-5720 (2 years)	Masters (Technology, MBA)
17	**Middle East College**	College (Private) 02/03	• Coventry University	• UK	1050 / semester	Diplomas and Bachelors (Engineering- Computer, Electronics, Communication, Science- Construction, Computing, Database, Multimedia, Business)
					1047 / semester	Masters (Information Technology- Business, Science)
18	**Modern College of Business and Science**	College (Private) 95/96	• University of Missouri • Franklin University • Management and	• US • US • Malaysia	86 – 108 / credit hour	Diplomas and Bachelors (Economics, Banking, Accounting, Business Administration, Marketing, Computer Science, Information Technology, Organizational Behavior, Statistics, Business law,

			Science University			Airport Management, Health and Safety)
					8000-10500	Masters (MBA, Human Resource)
19	**Muscat College**	College (Private) 97/98	• University of Sterling • Scottish Qualification Authority	• UK • UK	2272-2454 / year	Diplomas and Bachelors (Accounting, Computing Science, Business, Quantity Surveying, Construction)
20	**Oman College of Management and Technology**	College (Private) 04/05	• Yarmuk Universiy	• Jordan	1650 / year	Diplomas and Bachelors (Accounting, Finance, Banking, Business Administration, Computer Science, Interior Design)
21	**Oman Dental College**	College (Private) 05/06	• AB Shetty Memorial Institute of Dental Sciences • The University Complutense of Madrid	• India • Spain	3975-5950 / year	Bachelors (Dental Sciences)
22	**Oman Medical College**	College (Private) 01/02	• University of West Virginia	• US	22250-50455	Bachelors (Medicine, Pharmacy)
23	**Oman Tourism College**	College (Private) 01/02	• Dublin Institute of Technology	• Ireland	600 / year	Diplomas and Bachelors (Tourism, Hospitality, Event Management)
24	**Scientific College of Design**	College (Private) 04/05	• Lebanese American University	• Lebanon	1152 / semester	Bachelors (Architecture, Animation, Graphic Design, Interior Design, Fine Arts, Photography, Fashion Design)
25		University College		• Australia	1760-1980	Diplomas and Bachelors (Accounting, Finance,

	Sur University College	(Private) 01/02	• Bond University • American University Cairo	• Egypt	(30 hour)	Banking, Information Technology, Mechanical Engineering, Architecture)
					7200	Masters (MBA)
26	**Waljat College**	College (Private) 01/02	• Birla Institute of Technology	• India	1570-2000	Diplomas and Bachelor (Business Administration, Computer Science , Electronics and Communication, Bio-Technology)
					2500	Masters (MBA)

Table 23: Affiliation Partnerships and Academic Programmes in Private Higher Education Institutions in Oman. Source: MoHE (2014-2015)

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Omani	2,018,000	1,957,000	2,013,000	2,093,000	2,127,000
Expatriate	1,156,000	816,000	1,282,000	1,530,000	1,683,000
Total	3,174,000	2,773,000	3,295,000	3,623,000	3,855,000

Table 24: Total Population in Millions in the Sultanate (Mid-Year Estimate). Source: National Centre for Statistics and Information (Statistical Year Book, 2014)

Age Group	**Omani Population**			
	Male	Female	Total	%
0-4	148,368	143,073	291,441	14
5-9	114,540	110,523	225,063	11
10-14	96,711	91,941	188,652	9
15-19	118,754	111,452	230,206	11
20-24	126,158	121,668	247,826	12
25-29	115,848	112,934	228,782	11
30-34	90,210	89,228	179,438	9
35-39	61,793	59,876	121,669	6
40-44	42,124	39,785	81,909	4
45-49	32,906	33,021	65,927	3

Table 25: Gender Groups in Oman (2012). Adapted from: Statistic Yearbook (2013)

Item		2009	2010	2011	2012	3013
General Education	Total Schools	1,040	1,040	1,040	1,043	1,042
	Students (000)	531	523	517	515	517
	Classes (000)	19	19	19	19	19
	Teachers (000)	45	45	52	53	55
Basic education	Schools (000)	802	824	855	891	920
	Students (000)	331	347	366	388	404
	Classes (000)	12	13	13	14	15
	Teachers (000)	31	32	39	41	49
Private Schools	Schools (000)	342	387	406	444	468
	Students (000)	56	65	71	79	89
Foreign Schools	Schools	33	36	37	39	40
	Students (000)	41	44	47	50	54
Literacy Centres	Centres	90	162	153	95	25
	Students (000)	10	11	9	10	10

Table 26: Indicators Illustrating Growth in Education in Oman. Source: National Centre for Statistics and Information, Statistical Year Book (2014)

Ministry of Education Expenditure (yrs)	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
Current (Mn. R.O)	406.5	474.5	528.6	578.1	669.5	737.3	866.2	920.1	1245.5	1,231.7
Investment (Mn. R.O)	44.9	42.4	51.0	51.9	48.9	53.2	59.0	47.7	73.2	84.2
% Share from total government	9.1	8.8	7.7	8.5	9.0	7.4	6.8	6.9	8.7	9.6

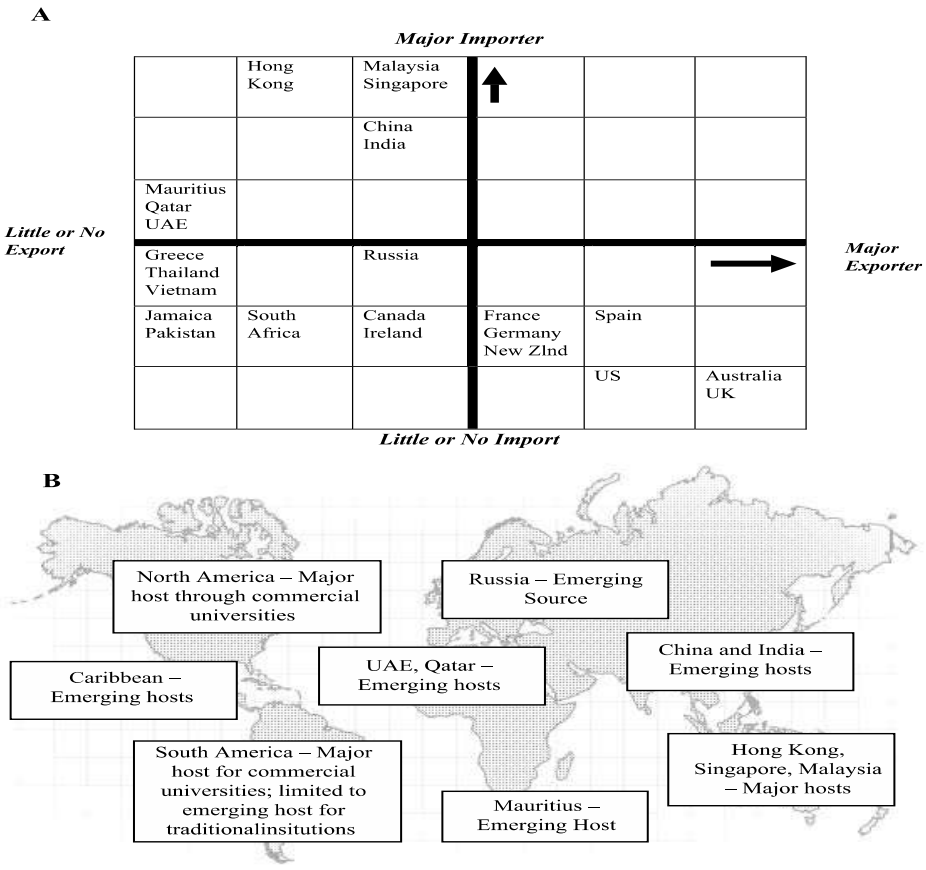
expenditure										

Table 27: Ministry of Education Expenditure. Source: National Centre for Statistics and Information, Statistical Year Book (2014)

Element of globalization	**Impact on higher education**	**Implications for international dimension of higher education**
Knowledge society Increasing importance attached to the production and use of knowledge as a wealth creator for nations	Growing emphasis on continuing education, lifelong learning and continual professional development creating a greater unmet demand for postsecondary education Need to develop new skills and knowledge resulting in new types of programmes and qualifications Role of universities in research and knowledge production is changing and becoming more commercialized	New types of private and public providers delivering education and training programmes across borders. For example, private media companies, networks of public/private institutions, corporate universities, multinational companies Programmes more responsive to market demand. Specialized training programmes being developed for niche market and for professional development purposes and distributed on a worldwide basis
ICTs New development in information and communication technologies and systems	New delivery methods used for domestic and cross- border education, especially online and satellite based	Increased international mobility of students, academics, education and training programmes, research, providers and projects. Mobility is physical and virtual
Market Economy Growth in number and influence of market-based economies around the world	Greater commercialization and commodification of higher education and training at domestic and international levels	Innovative international delivery methods such as e-learning, franchises; satellite campuses require more attention given to accreditation of programmes/providers and recognition of qualifications

Trade Liberalization New international and regional trade agreements developed to decrease barriers to trade	Import and export of educational services and products increased as barriers removed	New concerns about appropriateness of curriculum and teaching materials in different cultures and countries and the potential for homogenization as well as new opportunities for hybridization
Governance Creation of new international and regional governance structures and systems	The role of national level education actors both government and non-government is changing New regulatory and policy frameworks being considered at all levels	Increasing emphasis on commercially oriented export and import of education programmes and diminished importance to international development projects New international/regional frameworks under consideration to complement national and regional policies and practices especially in the areas of quality assurance, accreditation, credit transfer, recognition of qualifications, mobility of students

Table 28: Implications of Globalization for Internationalization. Source: Knight (2005)



Source: (a) Adapted from Garrett and Verbik (2003). (b) Adapted from Bjarnason (2006).

Figure 11: TNHE Activity. Source: Naidoo (2009)

H. Sample of Arabic Translation

إحدى التحديات تكمن في أن الناس الموجودين أعلى الهرم؛ هم ناس غير متعلمين تعليم أكاديمي يسمح لهم بمعرفة كيف تدار الجامعة أو كيف تبنى الأمم، اتجاهاتهم مادية في الأغلب ولكن هم الذين يديرون المشاريع سواء كجامعة أو المشاريع التي تدعم التعليم، فمجالس التعليم يفترض أن تدار من قبل أناس أكاديميين همهم الأول التعليم وليس الربح.

التحدي الأخر يكمن في الطلبة، يمكننا إيجاد 100 شريك دولي ولكن إذا لم نعرف ولم نستطع معرفة تأثير برامجهم على أدمغة الطلبة، إذن فنحن لم نعمل شيء.

التحدي الثالث هو اعتمادنا على الأجانب، قد يكون هذا الشريك الأجنبي ممتاز لكنه لا يعلمني ولا يترك لي شيء مكتوب استند عليه حتى يتمكن غيره من البناء عليه، فالحل هو بناء الذات والاستثمار في العمانيين، حتى لو ترك العماني مؤسستي وذهب لأخرى، فإن الخبرة مازالت في عمان . الشريك الأجنبي وحتى الوافد الذي يعمل لدي سيذهب.

The Challenges

One of the challenges is that people at the top of the pyramid do not have the academic background that allows them to know how to manage a university or how to build nations. Their interests are mostly financial. Yet, they are the ones managing the projects whether it is a university or projects supporting education. Education boards are supposed to be run by academics whose first priority is education and not profit.

The second challenge is students. We can have a hundred international partners; however, if we do not know the impacts of their programmes on our students, then it is useless.

The third challenge is our dependence on foreigners. This foreign partner could be excellent but he does not teach me and he does not leave me anything written I can depend on so others can build on it. The solution is capacity building and investment in Omanis. Even if an Omani leaves my organization and goes to another, his/her experience remains in Oman. Foreign partners and even expatriates, who work for me, will leave.

Quote	Issue	Challenge
One of the challenges is that people at the top of the pyramid do not have the academic background that allows them to know how to manage a university or how to build nations. Their interests are mostly financial. Yet, they are the ones managing the projects whether it is a university or projects supporting education. Education boards are supposed to	Top management/leadership No academic background Financial interest Risk of non-academic domination Decision making Separation of responsibility	Organizational

be run by academics whose first priority is education and not profit.		
The second challenge is students. We can have a hundred international partners; however, if we do not know the impacts of their programmes on our students, then it is useless.	Student Transformation of skill Transference of knowledge Impact/change	Academic
The third challenge is our dependence on foreigners. This foreign partner could be excellent but he does not teach me and he does not leave me anything written I can depend on so others can build on it. The solution is capacity building and investment in Omanis. Even if an Omani leaves my organization and goes to another, his/her experience remains in Oman. Foreign partners and even expatriates, who work for me, will leave.	Foreigners/partner Transference of knowledge Succession plan Capacity building Omanization Retention of expertise and knowledge	Organizational level (partner issue) + Organizational level (Local issue) + National level

I. Sample of Transcript

Participant number: 4
Length of interview: about 50 minutes

Q: **Could you please share with me your experience with international affiliation?**
Interviewee: (our university) had an affiliation with (X university) one time.

That affiliation I would say was not really successful because the people came, they made suggestions and then they would come 6 months later and make the same suggestions and come back after a year and make the same suggestions and I am not sure where the breakdown was but our experience here in this specific department was that we had one person come several times and basically say the same thing and eventually there was someone in the administration who noticed that some parts were just copied and pasted from one visit to the next.
There was another example where somebody came and gave a speech about marketing but the person who came seemed to really have no idea about our university. He didn't even know it was private, he didn't understand the level of students and so it wasn't an affiliation that I think was really helpful for both sides. It could have been and I am not sure why it wasn't. I don't know what broke down and at what level.'

Q: The last 7½ years you have been here, **what would you say was the role of the affiliates in the organization?**
Interviewee: Their role was to be a kind of a big brother. Their role was to **initiate** some programmes but basically to **come** and **review** programmes, to **discuss** with the teachers and **help us see where to go** and **what to do** in terms of their vast experience and as we were so new because we are only as (Y university), we are only (X number of years) old. So they were supposed to provide guidance in terms of: these are the things you should be doing, these are the best practices, etc., etc., and as I said, the reports may have been helpful but what they suggested wasn't really implemented and it may be because what they suggested wasn't feasible or it wasn't appropriate or it may be something that (our university) was not interested in but in many cases, as far as I know there has been no affiliation in the last year and a half or so.

Q: And if we say their role in you as a person, what would you say?
Interviewee: I used to be Director and I was trying to get somebody from the (partner university) to come and do some workshops here but … and they seemed very willing to come and we would, of course, pay for them but what they were suggesting for the workshop was nothing

new. It was sort of like old fish and it wasn't specifically tailored to what we need. We have really specific kind of student population here so I felt like I was looking for assistance but again there was a sort of mismatch between them and us.

Q: Interesting. If you would please elaborate on the word 'mismatch'
Interviewee: Well, I will go in a different direction and come back. As a Director, what I did was a new faculty orientation. What I found with a new faculty who came here is that they felt that if they had worked before in the Middle East, they understood what and how to teach here. When they actually started to teach, they realize that our student population is very different. They are very intelligent and wonderful students but they are not in some way socialized for academic situations and their level of English is very low. Their intelligence is fine. They are wonderful students but they don't have the level of English and I feel that kind of mismatch that sometimes happens between teacher and students.

When teachers go in and attempt to teach as they would at another university who had other students, who had native ability. That same kind of **mismatch** between teachers and students happened between us and the (partner university) in that they had a very cosmopolitan student group. They had bilingual multilingual students who had been taught in English for a long time.

When I was a Director, we did an exit survey for our students and most of our students were either not looking for a job or not thinking to get a job when they graduated and it was a very small survey but it was telling a lot … for example students said that they preferred to work for a family group or in a job that may not be with a company so I don't think the people from (partner university) really sort of understood our students because what they expect (from students) was so different and I think some of the other people from (partner university) wanted (this region) to be more like (their own country). It is not to say that it is not possible. I just I don't think it is necessary.

This goes into other factors like cultural issues. Right now, I am teaching a class on culture so more foreigners are coming to (this region).

(This) Region is surprisingly different, more quiet, people are pleasant, it is easy to live here as opposed to countries like Lebanon or Egypt or Yemen where being angry in public is not only allowed but kind of encouraged in a way and here it is not.

The opposite side for foreigners is difficult because you can't tell what people are thinking. People could hate you and you have no idea again because of that cultural imperative of having

a pleasant calm personality in public which means again … I was trying to help people understand that you could be grossly insulting somebody and you would never know. And (partner university) coming from a very different culture of much more confrontational, much more direct, much more abrupt, much more used to meetings where people would just say what they thought and get into argument with somebody.